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## FROM GIBRALTAR TO SUEZ



*Lord Strabolgi has also written :*

WILL CIVILIZATION CRASH ?

FREEDOM OF THE SEAS (IN COLLABORATION WITH SIR GEORGE YOUNG)

NEW WARS, NEW WEAPONS

THE REAL NAVY

INDIA : A WARNING

OUR DAILY PAY—THE ECONOMICS OF PLENTY

SAILORS, STATESMEN AND OTHERS

THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE

NARVIK—AND AFTER

THE CAMPAIGN IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

FROM  
GIBRALTAR TO SUEZ

*The Battle of the Middle Sea*

by  
LORD STRABOLGI, R.N.

*With 70 Illustrations and a Map.*

SECOND IMPRESSION

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## PREFACE

**T**HIS BOOK HAS BEEN WRITTEN IN ORDER to describe the great play of forces—political, economic, religious, racial—besides the military, naval and aerial struggle of the combatants in this contest for mastery in the Mediterranean. We see raging from Gibraltar to Suez and beyond, and from Berlin and London to Baghdad and Cairo, a titanic struggle for mastery waged as a total war.

Every one of the countries whose shores are washed by the waters of the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean are involved. The vibrations of the cannon in a sea engagement off the coasts of Greece or the rumble of tanks on the Plain of Larissa are heard from Mogadore on the Atlantic to Calcutta on the Hoogli.

In this struggle Germans, Italians, Arabs from Damascus and Baghdad, contend with men of all the races making up the British Commonwealth of Nations. Martial States like Yugoslavia and Greece are overthrown in less than a month's campaigning.

Indian soldiers fighting in Cyrenaica know that they are helping to ward off Nazi designs on the cities and plains of Hindustan. Great mechanized columns follow the routes of the marching armies of the conquerors of the past. Ancient seats of

learning and civilization, Gnossus, Athens, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo, are threatened by the massed aeroplanes of the savages who, at the bidding of an uncouth fanatic, have prostituted the science and knowledge they have inherited.

On the outcome of the campaign in the Middle Sea may well depend the future of human Society for hundreds of years. The opening phrases are described in the pages which follow. I have attempted to indicate certain conclusions and lessons to be drawn from these sombre events.

Wars are usually won by the combatant which makes the fewest mistakes. Victories can be hastened by the quick appreciation of blunders and the reasons for them, and the ready detection of weaknesses in one's own armour. Our situation has been saved again and again in this campaign by the superb fighting qualities of the free men who wrestled in arms with our terrible adversaries. For their sake alone we must see to it that no more avoidable handicaps should be placed on their heroism and devotion.

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# FROM GIBRALTAR TO SUEZ

## CHAPTER I

### THE MIDDLE SEA

THE MEDITERRANEAN, LIKE THE THAMES, is liquid history. On its shores have flourished ancient civilizations and cultures. Great Empires have waxed and waned in the lands washed by its waters. The history of much of human advancement was made by the Mediterranean men. Egypt, Palestine, the Phœnician colonies including Carthage, Greece, Rome, the Ottoman Empire, the great Arab and Moorish States of the Middle Ages, all regarded the Mediterranean as their sea of destiny.

Commerce and navigation in this Middle Sea enriched the great city states of Genoa and Venice. In the Old World, those who controlled the Mediterranean dominated the affairs of Europe. The discovery of the sea passage round the Cape of Good Hope to the East and the opening up of the New World and Australasia lessened the importance of the Mediterranean ; but the Middle Sea recovered its place in the affairs of mankind with the cutting of the Suez Canal.

Every would-be conqueror has cast ambitious eyes on the Middle Sea. No sooner had the English

of the Commonwealth and the later Stuarts grasped the fact that they were no longer a small people, but had a part to play in the affairs of Europe, than they sought a foothold in the Mediterranean. Much of our naval history, on which is based our own Imperial power, is bound up with attempts to spread our influence along the shores of the Middle Sea.

Far-sighted statesmen occupied Tangier in 1662. We held it until 1684, when in a fit of isolationism, combined with parsimony, we surrendered it and its harbour to the Moors.

The capture of Gibraltar in 1704 and its retention under the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 provided us with a new foothold. We still needed a base eastwards of the Pillars of Hercules. Minorca served for a time until after various vicissitudes it was ceded to Spain in 1802 under the Peace of Amiens. The acquisition of Malta, recaptured from Napoleon in 1800 with the help of the Maltese, and allocated to Britain under the Treaty of Paris in 1814, appeared to base us firmly in the very middle of the Mediterranean until the coming of air power diminished its value as a naval harbour. Cyprus, at the eastern end, provided another base, and it is sad to observe how we have neglected to develop that beautiful island. It could have been made into a first-class naval and air station.

Our influence in Egypt has fortunately been paramount since the opening of the Suez Canal. The present Treaty between Britain and Egypt, and our

alliance with Turkey, saw us firmly based in the eastern basin when the second World War broke out in September 1939. Fortunately, also, we have been farsighted in establishing ourselves in the Red Sea, the back door to the Mediterranean.

A further reinsurance after the last World War was the British Mandate for Palestine. Despite hesitations and some shortsightedness, we have enabled a politically reliable population of half a million Jewish settlers to establish themselves in the Holy Land.

Geographically and politically, therefore, we appeared strong in this vital sea when Hitler and his confederates embarked on their campaign for world domination. How we have defended this great heritage will be explained in the chapters which follow.

The importance of the Mediterranean had been recognized by other would-be conquerors and Imperialists. Napoleon's strategy of invading Egypt and Syria, as a preliminary to an advance on India, was sound. It was defeated by British sea power.

The rulers of the second German Reich under Prussian leadership sought to follow in our footsteps and establish themselves in the Mediterranean. Kaiser Wilhelm II attempted to implement this policy in Morocco and nearly caused an outbreak of war four years before August 1914. When that war did come, our position in the Mediterranean was unchallenged, thanks in part to the fact that

France and Italy were our allies. The small Austrian Navy was contained in the Adriatic, and only U-boats were able to operate against us. Yet so important were the lines of communication through the Mediterranean in the war of 1914-18 that we were glad of the help of a flotilla of Japanese destroyers to operate with us in the eastern basin for convoy protection.

When the present war broke out our position in the Middle Sea seemed strong enough. True, Italy was a member of the Axis and declared her non-belligerency. The appeasement policy died hard on both sides on Downing Street and we allowed the Mussolini régime to accumulate large stocks of oil and other war materials. The mistaken policy of kindness to the jackal wearing a tiger's skin even permitted Italy to provide the main leak in the blockade of Germany. Nevertheless, the naval and military dispositions of the British and French Naval Staffs were based on the possibility of Italy intervening against us at any moment.

Spain, also, was a doubtful factor. The strategic importance of Spain in any great war engaging the resources of the British Empire can hardly be exaggerated. All the more strange, therefore, was the policy of the British and French Governments during the Spanish insurrection. The Republican and Democratic Government in Madrid was assailed by rebellious officers in the army, supported by other reactionary elements, at the instigation of Berlin

and Rome. Much material help was given by the two Axis Powers from the very beginning, and it increased both in openness and magnitude until the insurrection was successful. The great forces of Italian soldiers, German and Italian aeroplanes and their pilots, German technicians, tanks, artillery and war material of all kinds made the task of the Republicans impossible despite the gallantry and tenacity of their somewhat amateurish armies. During all this time the British and French Cabinets connived at the farcical policy of non-intervention. This had the practical effect of leaving open all the avenues of supplies for the insurgents while closing every avenue of supply to the legitimate government.<sup>1</sup> Even the artillery, aeroplanes and other arms ordered and paid for before the outbreak of the insurrection were prevented from reaching the Government of Madrid.

The only real protest ever made was when Italian submarines in the Mediterranean, not content with sinking Spanish merchant ships, began to attack British vessels. The Mediterranean Powers were rapidly mobilized by vigorous British diplomatic action, and the British and French Navies ordered to attack any submarine found in a hostile attitude near the trade routes. Mr. Anthony Eden was responsible for this refreshing example of firm action.

<sup>1</sup> The small material help Russia was able to send and the still smaller supplies of munitions furnished clandestinely by the French Government were swamped by the wealth of material and men sent by the Axis Powers.



It put a stop to the Italian piracy, but was, unfortunately, only a flash in the pan. The French General Staff was uneasy about the whole Spanish business, dreading a hostile Fascist Government in Madrid and a new frontier to defend ; but the Government of the Popular Front in Paris, under the leadership of M. Leon Blum, was in a weak position, continually threatened by the reactionary and pro-Fascist parties in France. Far from being sustained by the British Government, which was in a much stronger and more independent position, all the advice given to the French Cabinet from Downing Street was to avoid complications at all costs and to acquiesce in the ultimate triumph of the insurrectionaries. The British Government of the day appeared completely blind to the dangers involved. The Spanish Civil War was a curtain-raiser to the World War. Here was fought the opening campaign in a war against freedom, democracy and human rights, the subsequent stages of which included the subjugation of most of Europe, including France herself.

The greatest blame of all attaches to the British Admiralty. This great Office of State has always had considerable influence over any British Government, quite irrespective of the political complexion of the Cabinet. The great prestige of the British Admiralty and its tremendous responsibilities place it, deservedly, in a position where in matters of strategy affecting the safety of the kingdom and the

welfare of the Empire its word must be heeded. Yet the Board of Admiralty remained complacent, and apart from the anti-piracy patrols referred to above, its activities were restricted to sending British men-of-war to rescue fugitives from threatened Spanish seaports. Even the mounting of German heavy artillery on the Spanish mainland to command the Bay of Gibraltar failed to open the eyes of those whose primary responsibility was the supremacy of the Royal Navy and all that it stands for.

The prophecies of danger unfortunately came true. A Spanish Government of the Centre and Left, friendly to the democratic Powers and bitterly opposed to Fascism and Nazism, was replaced by one which promptly threw in its lot with the Axis, took forcible possession of Tangier and, from the very first day of the outbreak of war, presented a serious danger to the Allied cause. War weariness, poverty and dependence on overseas supplies of food were the principal factors which prevented the Franco-Suñer Government from throwing in its lot openly with Berlin and Rome immediately after the French collapse.

From the viewpoint of Mediterranean strategy, an allied or friendly Spain is a British necessity. The Spanish coastline is indented by a number of magnificent harbours both on its Atlantic and Mediterranean shores. The western ports outflank British naval defences in the Atlantic for the shipping

using the Cape of Good Hope route. Since Italy intervened in the second World War it has been necessary to divert the bulk of British shipping from the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and from East Africa to Britain, and on their outward journeys also from Britain, round the Cape of Good Hope. Though convoys from east to west and west to east could be and were passed through the Mediterranean they had to be heavily escorted. Gibraltar itself is a strong fortress, but is deficient in aerodrome space. Furthermore, its harbour on the west side of the Rock is within heavy gun range of the perimeter of hills on the Spanish mainland which surround the Bay of Gibraltar in the form of a horseshoe. The Bay of Gibraltar, so useful for the assembling and marshalling of convoys, is also within long range of artillery mounted on the Spanish or Morocco side of the Straits. A hostile Spain can, therefore, render the naval and commercial harbours at Gibraltar and the Bay itself unusable. Heavy guns on each side of the eight-miles-wide Straits can hinder the passage of shipping in daylight. The fortress is immensely strong against land assault and would undoubtedly withstand a long siege. Without another friendly base nearer than Bathurst to the south, or Plymouth to the north, supposing Portugal remains neutral, it would be difficult for the British Fleet to prevent German military forces which had been given right of passage through Spain, from crossing to North

Africa and establishing themselves at Casablanca, Dakar and other French Atlantic ports. From there they could still further threaten our shipping not only on passage to and from the Cape of Good Hope but also from the South Atlantic. The importance of Gibraltar can, therefore, hardly be exaggerated ; and yet its usefulness under modern conditions depends on a friendly Spanish hinterland.

The outbreak of war found Spain neutral ; and though the Franco Government later moved into the position of non-belligerency, Gibraltar has been the base for the Western Mediterranean squadron. This squadron has the threefold duty of maintaining the commercial blockade, stopping Italian commerce raiders from leaving the Mediterranean for the outer oceans, and preventing a junction between the German and Italian fleets in case the Germans chose to send some of their somewhat meagre naval forces into the Mediterranean, or if the Italian Fleet should plan a sortie for the purpose of supporting an invasion of the British Islands.

Ever since Malta became a Crown Colony, its first-class naval dockyard and base have been a kind of pivot for our naval power in the Mediterranean. Though the Middle Sea is 1,200 miles wide in its widest part, it narrows to 300 miles between Sicily and Tripoli. From the southernmost point of Sicily to the nearest point on the African coast, in French Tunisia, the sea passage is only 85 miles. In this channel, 55 miles from the island of Sicily,

lies Malta. Alexandria is nearly 1,000 miles to the eastward and Gibraltar lies approximately the same distance to the west. Before the air age, therefore, Malta was of great value to the Fleet. With the immense growth of the Air Force of the principal Powers, including the Italian, Malta is exposed to air attack.

Before the present war there was much uncertainty about the actual menace to warships, both under weigh at sea or moored in harbour, by air action. There is still a good deal of uncertainty. On the whole, the airmen have been disappointed in the results of air action against warships at sea. Men-of-war on both sides have been sunk or damaged by bombs or torpedoes launched from special machines flying close to the surface of the sea. Though a tremendous number of such attacks have failed, they have had their successes.

Thus, in the long running engagement, afterwards named the Battle of Cape Matapan, successful torpedo attacks were carried out from the aircraft-carrier *Formidable* on units of the Italian Fleet, including the most valuable of the Italian battle-ships present. The threat of air attack deterred the Commander-in-Chief of the British Home Fleet from sending a force of large surface ships into the Kattegat either to deal with the German warships attacking the Norwegian capital of Oslo or to prevent the passage of German troop transports and supply ships by sea to Norway from the Baltic.

When the French warships at Oran were attacked by Admiral Somerville's squadron from Gibraltar, the battle-cruiser *Strasbourg* made for Toulon but was attacked and torpedoed on the way by British aircraft, and arrived in a damaged condition. As for air attack on warships in harbour, there were several successes in the Norwegian and Libyan campaigns. The most important and spectacular example of damage to warships in port was the action against the Italian Fleet in Taranto harbour. In the North African campaign Italian warships were successfully attacked from the air in Tobruk and Tripoli harbours and there have been other examples. In view of the general uncertainty, therefore, the British Admiralty was probably right in deciding that Malta was too dangerous for use as a general base by the Mediterranean Fleet.

Those who are inclined to criticize the Board of Admiralty and our naval commanders for their reluctance to run undue risks with the Fleet, should reflect on the composition of a modern navy. Its backbone is the heavy ships-of-the-line, the battle-ships and battle-cruisers. They take three years to build, including the long time needed to manufacture the heavy guns and mountings. Smaller warships, squadrons of aeroplanes, regiments of tanks, even divisions of infantrymen, can be replaced in a much shorter time. We began the present war with fifteen ships-of-the-line of which one, the *Royal Oak*, was lost by submarine action in Scapa Flow.

By the beginning of 1941 important additions, represented by the "King George V" class of battleship, were made to the Fleet, but we had to face the prospect of going through the critical year of 1941 with less than a score of capital ships.

Italy, intervening when France was at her last gasp, brought six ships-of-the-line to the Axis pool, making a total of ten German and Italian heavy warships by the late spring of 1941.

Japan's position was ambiguous, American reluctance to enter the war persistent, and the Fleet has many duties. The home front must be guarded against invasion, the German use of ships-of-the-line as commerce raiders raises special problems, and we need heavy warships at each end of the Mediterranean. Though victories cannot be won without risks, the loss or disablement of a number of ships-of-the-line by air action would have had a serious effect on the whole of our naval dispositions.

During the crisis with Italy in 1935 arising out of sanctions applied to that country under the ægis of the League of Nations when Abyssinia was invaded, the main Mediterranean Fleet was concentrated at Alexandria. In September 1939, although Italy declared her non-belligerency, no man in his senses trusted the word of Mussolini and there was always the danger of a surprise attack on Malta from the Sicilian airports without a declaration of war. Once again, therefore, the

eastern squadron of the Mediterranean Fleet was based on Alexandria.

When Italy attacked Greece in October of the following year, we acquired the use of the island of Crete with the good harbour of Suda Bay, as part of the plan for assisting our Allies. Malta is 600 miles from Suda Bay. So long as France was fighting on our side, these changes in the dispositions of the British naval forces in the Mediterranean were not so important in their results as later on, as will be described. France has a number of first-class naval bases in the Mediterranean, especially Toulon and the fine natural harbour of Bizerta on the North African coast. After the capitulation of France, the lack of a safe base in the central basin of the Mediterranean created special difficulties.

From the point of view of our principal enemy, Germany, the ejection of the British from the Mediterranean would be of the greatest political and military importance. So long as a British Fleet in being rides the waters of the Middle Sea, British influence can be exercised on every country bordering upon it. These include the great French and Italian colonies in North Africa, Egypt, Turkey and all the Balkan States. Until that British Fleet has been defeated, Italy's communications with the outside world are cut. British naval power in the Mediterranean means that military help can be sent to Turkey, Greece, or any other country threatened by the Axis Powers.



The loss of the Mediterranean would not necessarily mean the defeat of Britain. We have had to evacuate the Middle Sea in previous wars ; but its loss would encourage our enemies and weaken our friends to a great extent. British sea power in the Mediterranean can prevent the fulfilment of the old German dream of a drive to the East, with Persia and India as the great prizes. British sea power in the Mediterranean can sustain Turkey and, in changed circumstances, can enable co-operation with a Russia prepared to fight against, or attacked by, Nazi Germany. A successful campaign in the Mediterranean would put us well on the road to winning the present war. An unsuccessful campaign and the forced abandonment of the Middle Sea would make victory doubly difficult.

## CHAPTER II

### BEFORE ITALY INTERVENED

**D**URING THE FIRST PERIOD OF THE WAR, in which Poland was overrun, and during the long winter of inactivity which followed on the Western Front, the Mediterranean was a quiet area. The Italian main battle fleet consisted only of four ships-of-the-line, the *Andrea Doria*, *Caio Duilio*, *Conte di Cavour*, and *Giulio Cesare*. All were of pre-1914 war construction, though the *Cavour* and *Cesare* had been practically rebuilt. The *Andrea Doria* and *Caio Duilio* were actually under reconstruction, and this work had not been finished in September 1939. None of these old battleships is considered of great fighting value. Two new 35,000-ton battleships, the *Vittorio Veneto* and *Littorio*, of which we shall hear later, were building but not complete. In addition Italy had 7 heavy cruisers and 12 very fast light cruisers, 46 destroyers, and nearly 100 submarines. As there was always a possibility of Italy making a sudden intervention on the side of her Axis partner, the appropriate naval dispositions were taken. For reasons explained in the previous chapter, Malta was used as little as possible by our few and valuable heavy warships. The *Valiant* and *Barham*, 31,000-ton fast battleships

of the "Queen Elizabeth" type, were stationed at Alexandria with a flotilla of destroyers, some submarines and a number of light cruisers, including reinforcements from the Australian and New Zealand Navies. After the surrender of France the battleship *Warspite* was dispatched from home waters to reinforce the eastern squadron.

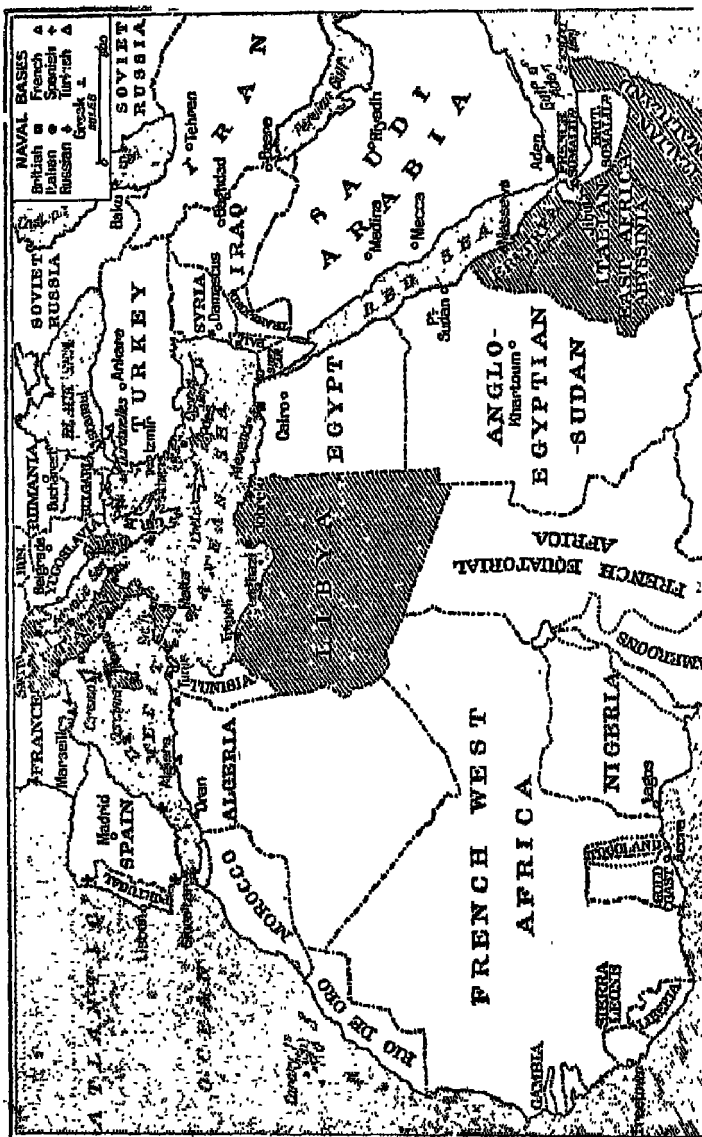
River gunboats withdrawn from the China station were ordered to make their way across the Indian Ocean and through the Suez Canal to join Admiral Cunningham's flag. They were found invaluable for inshore service during the North African operations. Also serving under Admiral Cunningham's flag was the French battleship *Lorraine* and some smaller French warships.

The main French Fleet, stationed at Toulon, Oran and Bizerta, was responsible for the Western Mediterranean. British air forces in Egypt were strengthened, under the command of Air Vice-Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore. As part of the Allied grand strategy a large mixed force known as the Army of the Middle East was concentrated under General Weygand. French metropolitan troops, part of the famous Foreign Legion, and French colonial troops, were gradually brought to Syria, while in Palestine were stationed Australian and New Zealand troops. British regiments normally in Egypt were added to both from the home garrison and India, and General Weygand's army included to begin with half an armoured and

mechanized British division also stationed in Egypt. The British and Imperial troops marshalled with this formidable army were under the command of General Sir Archibald Wavell. This Middle East Force was regarded as a strategical reserve. If the German hordes were to strike southward through the Balkans, thus threatening Turkey, it would be available to engage them. If Italy intervened, part of this force could strike westward at Libya simultaneously with a French invasion of Tripolitania from Tunisia. Under favourable circumstances it was hoped that this growing army would be able later to take the offensive, possibly through the Balkans, in order to strike at Austria.

Always with an eye to the possibility of Italian intervention, the defences of Malta were strengthened and the garrison increased. So long as France was our active ally in the war our combined strength in the Mediterranean was formidable, and the general situation appeared highly satisfactory.

The political situation was interesting. Under the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty we were entitled to use Egyptian territory, ports and aerodromes for the defence of that country and the Suez Canal. Egypt herself remained in a state of non-belligerency, her Government declaring that the Egyptian Army would intervene if Egypt were directly invaded. Our Treaty with Turkey for mutual defence provided that the Turkish Republic would intervene on the side of the Allies if another Mediterranean



Power, meaning, of course, Italy, entered into the conflict. There was, however, a saving or escape clause from the Turkish point of view. Turkey was not required to intervene in a war if there was a danger of her having to fight Russia. Since the signing of the Russo-German Pact just before the German invasion of Poland, the position of the Russian Government has been uncertain. The Russian army in the Caucasus might be regarded as a threat to Turkey's eastern frontier. At the same time, despite the public professions of the Soviet leaders, no Russian Government, whatever its complexion, can view with equanimity the occupation of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles by any other Great Power. The invasion of Denmark and Norway in the spring of 1940 meant in effect the control of the entrance into the Baltic by Nazi Germany. If the Germans were to follow this up by a successful assault on the entrance to the Black Sea, Russia's communications with the West would be still further curtailed. That M. Stalin and his advisers feared the future actions of a victorious Germany was an open secret. It explains the incorporation of the three Baltic States of Esthonia, Latvia and Lithuania within the Soviet system, and the attack on Finland. The rulers at the Kremlin sought at all costs to obtain strategical positions in the Eastern Baltic in order to deter a future German attack on Leningrad, the second city in the U.S.S.R.

The Russo-Finnish war, in the winter of 1939-40, aroused very strong feelings of indignation in many countries, including Britain and France. It was represented as a naked act of aggression and considerable material assistance was sent by the British and French Governments to the Finns. The two allies, indeed, went further, and prepared a large expeditionary force to go to the aid of Finland. It never actually started, partly because the Norwegian and Swedish Governments refused right of passage, and partly because after much hard fighting, during which the Finns offered an unexpectedly gallant and efficient defence, the Russian and Finnish Governments came to terms. This Russo-Finnish conflict appeared to certain amateur strategists amongst the British and French politicians to present opportunities. Their point of view, which, in view of subsequent events, now appears particularly crazy, was that with the over-running of Poland the war against Germany had reached a stalemate. Both the great systems of fortifications facing each other in the West, the Maginot and Siegfried lines, were reckoned as impregnable to assault. There sprang up a curious theory that it was in the interests of the Allies to spread the war. Plans were discussed in influential circles both in Paris and London, but more particularly in Paris, for going to war with Russia as a means of injuring Germany. The theory seemed to be that if the Russians were assailed they would not be able to send wheat, oil and the other

materials of economic war to Germany. The existence of General Weygand's army of strategical reserve in the Middle East increased this temptation. Certain leaders of the French bourgeoisie, as subsequent events proved only too clearly, were more hostile to Russian Bolshevism than to German Nazism. Unfortunately they had their counterparts in Britain, though fortunately these counterparts were less influential than this particular section of French politicians. The insane plan of attacking Russia in the north and through the Black Sea was, in reality, a hangover from the appeasement period which culminated in the Agreement of Munich and which only began to wane with the actual outbreak of war with Germany.

Happily these visionary ideas of spreading the war did not appeal very strongly to the Allied fighting chiefs. They did not share the illusions of some politicians about the internal weakness of Germany and the military weakness of Russia. There was some loose talk about using General Weygand's long-distance aeroplanes for bombing the Baku oilfields, but it remained talk. Wiser counsels prevailed. They were helped by the knowledge that while the masses of the people in Britain were united in their determination to fight the war to the bitter end until Hitler and his Nazi system were destroyed, an assault on Russia would be received with disfavour and might indeed imperil national unity.



As Mr. Churchill himself put it, one war at a time was enough.

The idea of spreading the war was perfectly sound if new fronts against Germany were sought on friendly soil. The correct strategy, political and military, was to seek allies in the Balkans. There the Nazis were no better loved than in any other part of the world. The Hungarians were by tradition and modern sentiment anti-German. Roumania, for long marked out as a victim of German aggression, had been given a joint guarantee by Britain and France after the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. This diabolical breach of faith on the part of Hitler profoundly shocked the late Mr. Neville Chamberlain and those who stood nearest to him in the British political hierarchy. Since 1931 the painfully built-up system of collective security under the League of Nations had been allowed to disintegrate. It showed itself in being for the last time during the period of sanctions against Italy in 1935. It never recovered from the half-hearted way in which the economic sanctions were applied and their final quietus from the lips of the British Prime Minister of the day, the late Mr. Neville Chamberlain, when he described sanctions as "midsummer madness."

The invasion of Czechoslovakia demonstrated for the third or fourth time that when Hitler declared, as he always did after an act of aggression, that he had no further territorial ambitions, he was

lying. A desperate attempt was then made to reconstruct some system of collective security. The cloaks of Allied guarantees was thrown over Poland, Roumania and Greece. The Serbs, as subsequent events showed, were also bitterly anti-Nazi. Greece, with good reason, shared with the Serbs the apprehension of further acts of aggression from the other Axis partner, Italy. Bulgaria was a dissatisfied State, having lost much territory after the war of 1914-18 as a penalty for supporting Germany and Austria ; but it should not have been impossible to bring her into the Allied orbit by certain modest territorial concessions. If, for example, Southern Dobruja had been ceded by Roumania earlier and if the long-promised direct access to the Ægean Sea had been made available by arrangement with the Greeks, Bulgaria might have taken her place in that Balkan bloc which far-sighted statesmen had been dreaming about, and sometimes working for, during two decades. It was not too late after war had actually broken out. Vigorous diplomacy, commercial concessions, the gift of modern weapons and aircraft, might have brought in these Balkan States, who together constitute a great military power, on our side. Then there would have been a new front and a way into Austria, the weaker partner of the Nazi system. Unfortunately the diplomacy of Downing Street and the Quai d'Orsay was "correct," old-fashioned, thoroughly respectable, but not vigorous enough. The British Council did its best to

spread an interest in British culture in the Balkans, and some slight efforts were made to encourage trade with these potentially rich countries.

As for modern weapons, Britain was woefully short of them herself. We had to arm Turkey ; and though France had a better supply of artillery and tanks, the French leaders preferred to keep them for their own long frontier with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

German diplomacy was not at all respectable. It was certainly vigorous, and backed by unlimited funds. German propaganda was aggressive and in the commercial field she offered her great market for the foodstuffs and raw materials of the Balkan States. Serbian cattle, pigs, bauxite and timber, Roumanian oil and wheat, Greek tobacco and currants, Hungarian cereals, were all absorbed into the insatiable maw of Greater Germany, especially after the incorporation of Austria, under the various clearing arrangements. In return, a certain amount of machinery and industrial goods were sent, and plenty of promises to pay ; but the landowners and peasants appeared to be receiving payment for their crops and products and to be sure of a steady market at fixed prices.

As for weapons of war, Germany even supplied some of these, including aeroplanes, to Yugoslavia. The greatest German diplomatic weapon was the Luftwaffe. To destroy by air-raids the country's capital, and its inhabitants, was the threat held out

to every one of the smaller States in Europe when Germany desired to coerce their governments. After what was actually done to Warsaw, and later to Rotterdam, this threat was a very real one to little States with small air forces and few anti-aircraft guns. If, in addition, there was a German minority in their country, as in Hungary and Yugoslavia, these tools, willing or unwilling, of Nazi diplomacy were ready to hand. If not, there were quislings to be flattered or bribed, and an immense army of secret agents working underground everywhere. The ground, therefore, had been well prepared, especially in Hungary, Roumania and Bulgaria, before the collapse of France. After this dire event, too many Balkan leaders believed, usually against their own wishes and desires, that Germany could not lose the war. When at the eleventh hour before the invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia by Germany, a real attempt was made to weld these two countries and Turkey into an alliance for mutual defence, it was too late. The time for these manœuvres was the winter of 1939-40. If they had succeeded, General Weygand's army could have taken the initiative, with very different results on the course of the whole of the war.

## CHAPTER III

### ITALY ENTERS THE WAR

ITALY, THROUGH THE VOICE OF MUSSOLINI, declared war on Britain and France on 10 June, 1940. There is ample evidence that most of the aristocracy and the great bulk of the middle and working classes detested the idea of fighting on the side of Germany. The Fascist Party, however, had so muzzled public opinion and terrorized any possible opposition, that the Italian people themselves had little say in the matter. Mr. Winston Churchill, in his famous surprise broadcast to the Italian people, was justified in his accusation that the weight of this crime lay almost solely on the shoulders of Signor Mussolini. The temptation of striking France in the back when she was reeling and staggering under the blows of the German armies, and when it was obvious that nothing could save her from defeat in Europe, was too great to be resisted. In the previous nine months Italy had been treated tenderly under our blockade system, and had been able to build up considerable stocks of oil, food, and other necessary supplies.

At the time of the Munich crisis in September 1938 the British plan was to present Italy with an ultimatum in the event of the negotiations breaking

down, and war commencing between Britain, France and Czechoslovakia on the one hand, and Germany on the other. Her government was to be invited to declare itself for or against us one way or the other. The Admiralty were particularly insistent on this policy. It was reasoned that Italy, so long as she remained neutral, would immobilize a French army on her frontier, and a British fleet in the Mediterranean, and that she would act as a conduit pipe for supplies to Germany through our blockade. Why the same policy towards Italy was not adopted in September 1939 is one of the mysteries of these times. A section of the French politicians and other influential persons, including Marshal Petain and the Catholic Right, still hankered after the idea of forming a so-called Latin bloc with France, Spain and Italy, and their influence probably had a good deal to do with the decision to treat Italy gently and hope for the best. Certainly, Italy's strategical position was extremely weak. The country has to import the whole of its coal either by sea from Britain or over the hard-worked railway system from Germany, and she is dependent on outside sources for oil, iron, cotton, and other necessities and much of her foodstuffs. So long as France was in the war, her North African possessions of Tripolitania and Libya were open to a double invasion from French Tunisia to the west, and from the British Army of the Nile to the east. The Italian Air Force had been allowed to get out of date and was short

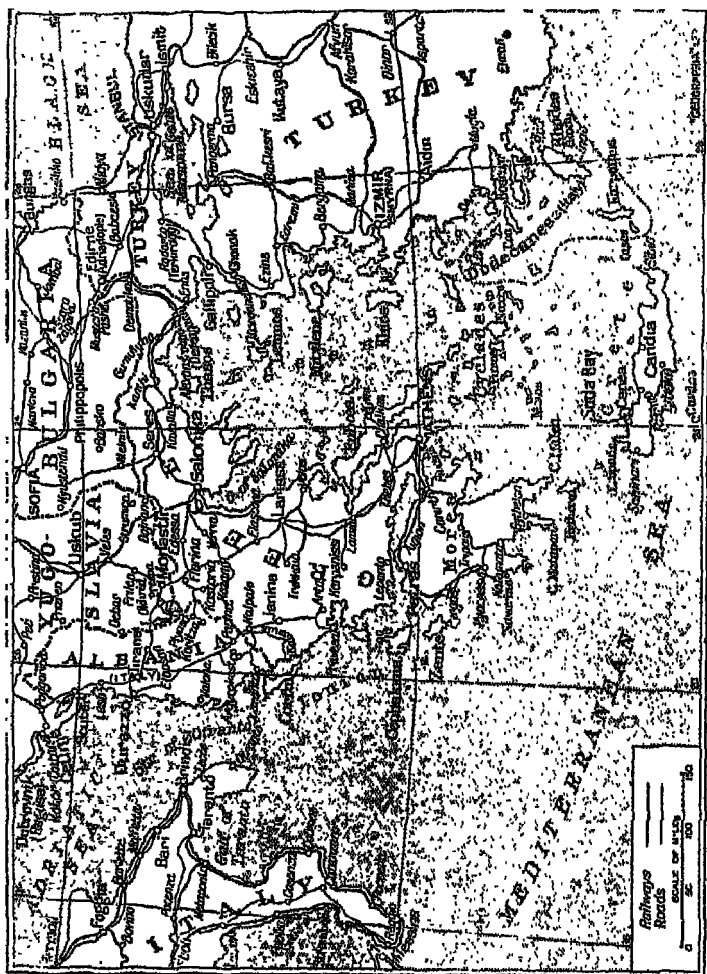
of modern machines, particularly fighters, even in June 1940. Her so-called Empire of East Africa, comprising the old Italian colony of Eritrea, Italian Somaliland, and the recently conquered Abyssinia, would be instantly cut off by sea unless the Italian Navy could totally defeat the combined British and French fleets in the Mediterranean. Indeed, with France still fighting, or even if resistance had continued in the French Empire, Italy in the war would only have had a nuisance value. True, her successful aggression against Albania and the possession of two fairly good Albanian ports at Valona and Durazzo gave the Italian Navy, in theory, the control of the Straits of Otranto, and, therefore, a dominating position in the Adriatic. Italy's other Mediterranean possession was the group of islands of the Dodecanese, several of which had been heavily fortified and provided with aerodromes, particularly Rhodes, the largest island in the group. With command of the eastern basin of the Mediterranean in dispute, however, these islands would be cut off from metropolitan Italy, and further exposed to attack from the mainland of Turkey if and when the Turkish Republic intervened in its turn.

The most welcome help brought by Italy to her Axis partner was her fleet. At the time of the loss of the Battle of France the Italian Admiralty had completed the two large and fast super-dreadnought battleships, *Vittorio Veneto* and *Littorio*. These vessels were as fast and powerful as any battleships

in the world's navies. Displacing 35,000 tons, they had a speed of 30 knots, and mounted a great main armament of nine 15-inch guns. Reconstruction work had been completed on the two older battleships mentioned in the last chapter, giving her four remodelled old-type dreadnoughts. These six heavy ships together constituted a respectable line of battle. In addition, the Italian Navy comprised seven strong and fast cruisers armed with 8-inch guns, twelve very fast light cruisers, some fifty large destroyers, forty small destroyers, and, by the time Italy came into the war, over a hundred submarines. A number of these had been constructed secretly, and the total submarine flotilla has been put as high as 130.

The collapse and surrender of metropolitan France greatly enhanced Italy's value to the Axis. If, as at one time seemed probable, the French Government had retired to North Africa, and continued the battle there, the British position in the Mediterranean would have been far more comfortable. In the event, however, apart from the French colonies which declared for General de Gaulle, the whole of the French Empire, including Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, and Syria, followed the lead of the Vichy Government. Relieved of anxiety to the westward, Marshal Graziani, with a large and heavily equipped army in Libya, was now allotted the role of invading Egypt with the Suez Canal as the principal objective. French Somaliland, also





falling in with the policy of the Vichy Government, left another difficult gap in the former Anglo-French defence system, and the Italian East African armies were able to score a spectacular but barren victory by overrunning British Somaliland. The most serious result of the French defection, however, was the uncertainty with regard to the future of the French Navy. Certain of the smaller ships, corvettes, destroyers and submarines declared for General de Gaulle, and escaped to British ports when the Petain Government surrendered. They were joined by the two old but serviceable battleships, *Courbet* and *Paris*. The battleship *Provence* and her smaller consorts, including three cruisers, which had been detached to serve under Admiral Cunningham in the Eastern Mediterranean, were at Alexandria, and, by friendly arrangement, were demilitarized. A new super-dreadnought, the *Jean Bart*, was under construction and in an advanced state at St. Nazaire. When it appeared obvious that that Government dockyard was in danger of occupation by the triumphant German armies, feverish and sustained labour was employed to make her ready for sea, and she escaped to Casablanca, where she still remains in an unfinished state. It is fortunate that the Germans were not able to obtain possession of her.

Certain of the crews of the French men-of-war which had sought refuge in Sheerness, Portsmouth, and Plymouth, had not declared for de Gaulle. Their ships were taken possession of at the time of

the Oran action. The officers and ratings were offered the choice of serving with the Free French forces or repatriation. Some hundreds opted for British naturalization, and were freely granted British citizenship.

The remainder of the French fleet remained in being, but a source of anxiety to the British Government. Six ships-of-the-line, including the formidable new battle-cruisers *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg*, sixteen cruisers, heavy and light, thirty-two destroyers, and a flotilla of about eighty submarines, if made over to Germany or Italy, would greatly increase our naval difficulties. When the Government of Marshal Petain decided on capitulation, solemn promises were made to the British Government that the French Fleet would not be handed over. M. Reynaud's Government had promised that all the French men-of-war in French waters would proceed to British harbours.

These promises were implemented, up to a point, in the armistice terms. The French Government of surrender was, indeed, to be permitted to use some of them for the defence of the French colonial possessions. The remainder were to be demilitarized. The Nazi Government gave an undertaking, for what it was worth, that the French warships would not be used against Britain. Once France was out of the war, however, it was quite impossible to foresee what would happen. Admiral Darlan, the French commander-in-chief, no doubt intended to

behave honourably, and would never willingly surrender the fleet which he had been responsible for bringing to a state of high efficiency. We can also believe that Marshal Petain and General Weygand also meant to behave honourably; yet the Government of Marshal Petain might not have survived. The Marshal himself was old and tired. M. Pierre Laval was for some time the second most important figure in the Bordeaux and Vichy Cabinets. It was known that he had ambitions to become the head of the State, and nobody in France, Britain, Germany, or anywhere else would trust that politician to keep his word or honour his bond if it suited him to do otherwise.

The Germans were quite capable of engineering a Fascist or Communist revolution in France, and, with more pliable tools in control could have had the French warships or anything else they required. Defeated and discouraged, France was in a hopelessly weak position, her Cabinet vulnerable to German threats, blackmail, and even assassination; while 2,000,000 French soldiers were prisoners in German hands, and maintained by the Nazis in almost intolerable conditions as hostages. A wave of anti-British feeling had swept through France. It was nourished and encouraged by German propaganda, and mainly took the form of accusations of betrayal by the British. A people defeated in war especially under the circumstances of the French débâcle, is always ready to look for scapegoats

Britain herself was in imminent peril, nearly all the equipment of our first Expeditionary Force having been lost in the evacuation from Dunkirk and the French ports.

A brighter feature of this sombre situation was the revolt against humiliation and disgrace by General de Gaulle, Admiral Muselier, and other prominent Frenchmen, including certain of the French colonial governors. These patriots raised the standard of Free France, and Frenchmen have been increasing their forces ever since. At one time it looked as if the whole of the French Empire would throw in its lot with General de Gaulle, and that the bulk of the French Navy would agree to continue the war.

Apart from the warships already referred to, the main body of the French Navy was concentrated at the French naval base of Mers-el-Kebir, near Oran, in North Africa. Its subsequent fate will be described.

Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, had been practically untouched by the war, and maintained strong military forces. Algeria and Tunisia are old French colonies, and in the protectorate of Morocco French prestige was still high.

General Weygand, sent to organize support for the Vichy Government in North Africa, was successful in his immediate aim ; and then began the long, slow, but thorough process of infiltration by German agents, technicians, and "tourists." Taking advantage of British preoccupations and the fall of

France, the Spanish Government, by one step after another, displaced the international régime in the Tangier territory by a Spanish administration. On one or two occasions the port of Tangier was actually used by Italian submarines, and vigorous action had to be taken in Madrid to stop this practice. It is doubtful whether more could have been done in French North Africa. General de Gaulle's movement, so successful in Equatorial Africa and the French Pacific colonies, failed for the time being on the Mediterranean coast of Africa.

The position in Syria was different. The country was held by France under mandate from the League of Nations. There had been much trouble there ever since the end of the last war, and a strong Nationalist movement amongst the Syrians and Druses led to long periods of unrest. We had shed our responsibilities in the neighbouring Arab State of Iraq, replacing our mandate by a twenty-five years' treaty; and the more politically advanced and cultured inhabitants of Syria expected the same treatment from France. Various French Governments had promised autonomy to the Syrians. The country was undoubtedly promised to Italy by the Nazis as a spoil of war, and, if it had not been for the existence of the eastern squadron of the British Mediterranean Fleet, would have been occupied by Italian troops after the French collapse. This would not have suited Turkey, but the difficult position of the Ankara Government has been already referred to.

Syria is of the greatest strategic importance to the whole scheme of British defence in the Mediterranean. In the north of Palestine is the magnificent modern harbour of Haifa, well situated in many respects to serve as an alternative naval base to Alexandria. Haifa is within long-distance gun range of Syrian territory. It is also the Levant terminus of one branch of the oil pipe line from the Mosul oilfield. This pipe line bifurcates on the Euphrates, the northern branch passing through Syrian territory and reaching the sea at Tripoli. General Weygand's army in Syria fell into a state of great confusion after the capitulation of metropolitan France. Some of the troops were Poles and Czechs, who insisted on joining the British in Palestine, and were eventually incorporated in General Wavell's Army of the Nile. Their example was followed by a large part of the Foreign Legion stationed in Syria, and by a number of French officers and soldiers espousing the cause of General de Gaulle. The French metropolitan troops had the not unnatural desire to return to their own homes and farms, while the African native troops were not too reliable. Syria certainly offered an opportunity for bold action on our part. We could have come to terms with Turkey on the matter and have appeared in the country as champions of the cause of Syrian nationalism. We had a considerable army of first-class troops in Palestine, including Australian and New Zealand soldiers, and the mandated territory would probably have

fallen to us like a ripe plum. The opportunity was, however, missed through divided counsels in Whitehall and Downing Street. The various departments of State never seemed to be able quite to make up their minds how to treat the Vichy Government. The Foreign Office was for appeasement. The Admiralty, especially where the French warships were concerned, was all for strong action, and had its way at Oran and Casablanca. In the result, Syria was left alone. So was lost another bastion to the defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal. Part of the German war plan is to obtain, by hook or by crook, the right of passage through Turkey, with the double object of invading Egypt from the north, and looting the oilfields of Iraq and Iran. A friendly Syria, garrisoned by a British army, with the large numbers of French fighting men who would no doubt have supported it, would be an obstacle to these plans and a buttress to Turkish resistance to Nazi wiles, threats or force. There is a good motor road from the Syrian port of Beirut through Damascus right across the desert to Baghdad. For the greater part of the year the intervening desert up to the Euphrates is practicable for modern mechanized forces.

I have described the disappointment of the British Government at the non-fulfilment of the promises made by the Bordeaux Government with regard to the bulk of the French Fleet. France had been bound to us by solemn treaty not to make a separate peace, and we could only agree to the independent



armistice negotiations on condition that the French Fleet should first sail for British ports. Much pressure through diplomatic channels, including help in this direction by the State Department in Washington, prevented the worst happening, and, as has been described, the most important of the completed French warships were concentrated at Oran and the nearby naval base of Mers-el-Kebir, where they were supposed to be undergoing a process of demilitarization. The British Cabinet had, however, many reasons for distrusting the policy of the Petain administration. One of its most scandalous acts was to break a solemn pledge given to the British Prime Minister that four hundred German pilots held prisoner in France should be sent to England for safe custody. These were among the most experienced and skilful of the German airmen, and most of them had been captured as a result of British air combats over France. This pledge was broken, and the four hundred German pilots released for further service with the Luftwaffe at a time when Germany was embarrassed by a shortage of experienced airmen. If anything, we hesitated too long in dealing with the French Navy. Such was the delay that public opinion became disturbed, and was reflected in Parliament. One excuse for the delay was the need felt to consult the United States Government before taking drastic action. This was understandable enough ; and it must also be appreciated how painful was the duty

of taking violent action against former comrades-in-arms who had shared with the Royal Navy the hardships and triumphs of the long winter campaign at sea and in the fighting off the coast of Norway, Flanders, and Northern France. Yet so important was it to prevent the possibility of these warships falling into German or Italian hands that there was no alternative to the action taken. Nor was it without precedent.

In 1807, after the bulk of the French Fleet had been destroyed at the battle of Trafalgar, Napoleon, still dreaming of an invasion of England, was combing Europe for a new fleet. Portugal had a number of powerful warships, and orders were given by Napoleon to his representative in that country, Marshal Junot, to obtain possession of them at all costs. We got wind of the project, and the British commander-in-chief on the station, Admiral Sir Sidney Smith, threatened to destroy the Portuguese warships unless they placed themselves out of harm's way. The Portuguese squadron sailed to Brazil. In the same year we discovered that by a secret clause in the Treaty of Tilsit, the Danes were pledged to place their considerable navy at the disposal of France. An expedition was sent immediately, under Admiral Gambia, demanding the handing over of the ships to British command. The Danish refusal was followed by the bombardment of Copenhagen and the capture of the warships.

On 3 July, 1940, a British destroyer arrived off

the port of Oran, and landed Captain Holland, who had been our naval attaché in Paris. The French commander, Admiral Gensoul, refused to see him. A document was then handed in, the most important passages in which were as follows :

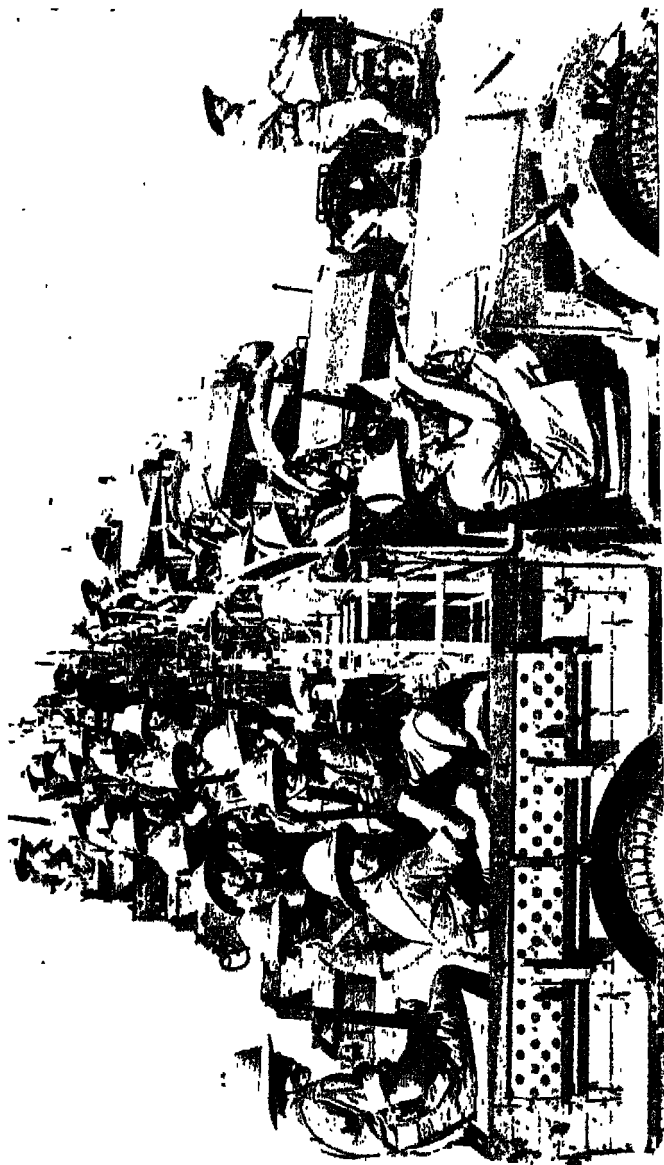
It is impossible for us, your comrades up to now, to allow your fine ships to fall into the power of the German or Italian enemy. We are determined to fight on to the end, and if we win, as we think we shall, we shall never forget that France was our ally, that our interests are the same as hers, and that our common enemy is Germany. Should we conquer, we solemnly declare that we shall restore the greatness and territory of France. For this purpose we must make sure that the best ships of the French Navy are not used against us by the common foe.

In these circumstances, His Majesty's Government has instructed me to demand that the French Fleet now at Mers-el-Kebir and Oran shall act in accordance with one of the following alternatives :

- (a) Sail with us and continue to fight for victory against the Germans and Italians.
- (b) Sail with reduced crews, under our control, to a British port. The reduced crews will be repatriated at the earliest possible moment.

If either of these courses is adopted by you we will restore your ships to France at the conclusion of the war, or pay full compensation if they are damaged meanwhile.

- (c) Alternatively, if you feel bound to stipulate that your ships should not be used against the Germans or Italians, unless these break the armistice, then sail them with us with reduced crews to some French port in the West Indies, Mar-



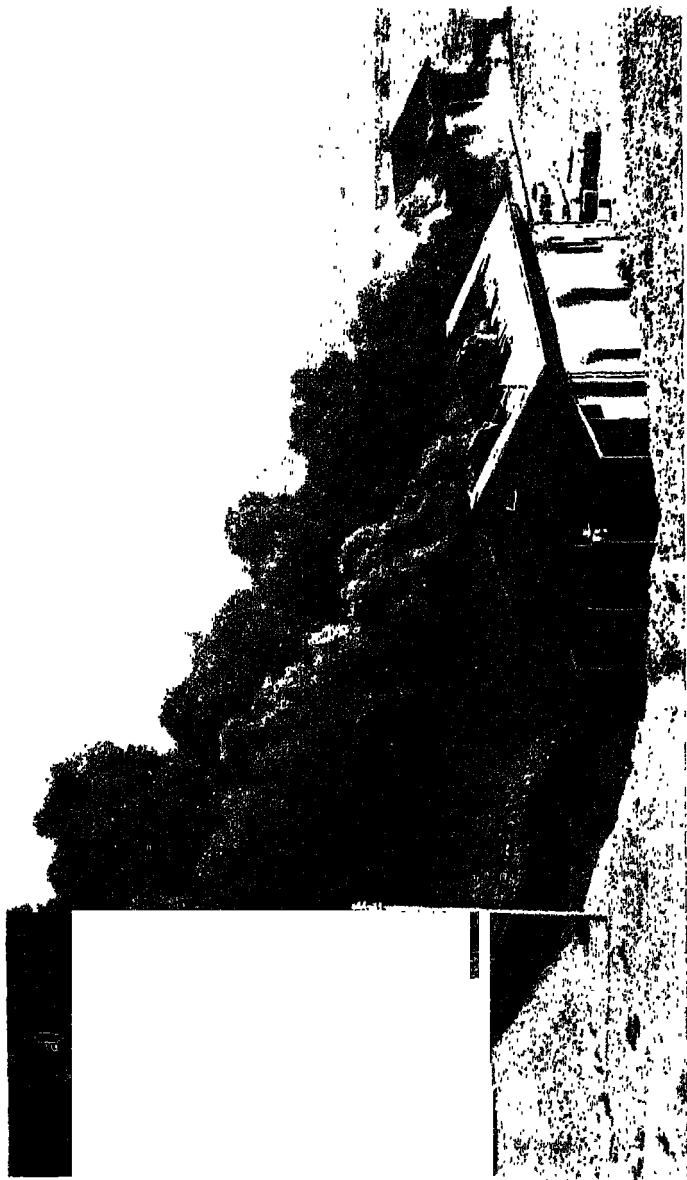
SOLDIERS OF FREE FRANCE IN LYBIA



AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS IN LYBIA



THE BURNING ITALIAN CRUISER *SAN GIORGIO* IN TOBRUK HARBOUR



BURNING BUILDINGS AT TOBRUK, WITH ITALIAN CRUISER SAN GIORGIO IN BACKGROUND

tinique, for instance, where they can be demilitarized to our satisfaction, or be perhaps entrusted to the United States and remain safe until the end of the war, the crews being repatriated.

If you refuse these fair offers, I must with profound regret require you to sink your ships within six hours.

Finally, failing the above, I have the order from His Majesty's Government to use whatever force may be necessary to prevent your ships from falling into German or Italian hands.

Two hours later, the Western Mediterranean squadron, under the command of Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville, arrived off the port. Negotiations continued during most of the day, but were abortive. It was necessary for Admiral Somerville to act quickly, and at 5.53 p.m. his squadron opened fire on the French Fleet. This action lasted for ten minutes, and was followed by air attack by naval aircraft flown from the *Ark Royal*. All the principal French warships were accounted for, except the battleship *Strasbourg*. She made out to sea, and reached Toulon in a damaged condition, having been hit by a torpedo launched by a British aeroplane. The damage to our war vessels, which were under fire from shore batteries and certain of the French warships, was trivial. The Italian Fleet did not attempt to intervene.

The material results of this melancholy episode were that the other modern French battle-cruiser, the *Dunkerque*, was heavily damaged. The battleship



*Provence* was seriously damaged, and the battleship *Bretagne* capsized, and became a total wreck. The seaplane-carrier *Commandant Teste* and two destroyers were sunk. After the engagement, Admiral Gensoul signalled that he was landing the crews of all his ships. As there was some uncertainty about the extent of the damage to the *Dunkerque*, a bombing attack was made on the battleship the next day by aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm, and she was hit six times. Attempts have since been made to repair her.

As a reprisal for this action, French aeroplanes were sent to bomb Gibraltar, but no serious damage resulted.

While every allowance can be made for the anger and grief of the French over this painful affair, the Petain Government nevertheless misrepresented it. The French people were told that the British ultimatum was "Join us, or scuttle your ships within six hours." No mention was made of the alternative of the ships being immobilized in British ports, or in French West Indian ports, or in United States harbours. The French official statement on the action, published through the Havas agency, was as follows :

The British explanations are valueless for the following reasons :

(1) The French Government had decided to reject the armistice if the question of the Fleet was not settled satisfactorily, that is to say, if it should be used by Germany

(2) The armistice provided that the Fleet should be conducted to ports in non-occupied zones, that it should be disarmed and put *hors de combat*, and further be guarded by French crews.

(3) To Hitler's word had been added those of the German Army Chiefs who were represented on the Armistice Commission.

(4) The British had demanded that the Fleet should follow them to British ports. But the French ships which were already there at the time of the armistice were treated as an enemy; they were emptied of their officers and crews. This shows that in reality they wanted to seize them.

(5) If France had given way before British pressure she would have broken her word.

(6) The armistice having been thus violated in an essential clause, Germany would have denounced it, occupied the rest of the country, and replied with reprisals.

(7) The Fleet at Oran was being disarmed; boiler fires were being extinguished, part of the crew was on land, munitions were being disembarked and the breeches were being removed from certain guns. The Navy was taking steps to render these ships incapable of further use and had given to Great Britain those guarantees which she asserted she wanted.

(8) It was against a fleet in such a situation that the British acted in contempt of military honour, assassinating sailors incapable of defending themselves. Not content with the first assassination, the British turned machine-guns on the victims while they still showed signs of life and were seeking safety on board launches.

The British Admiralty replied as follows :

The French Government at Vichy is reported to have

issued an account of the British action against French naval units at Oran. This account is reported to contain allegations that our forces machine-gunned French sailors both on the deck of the *Dunkerque* and when they were trying to abandon ship.

There is no truth whatever in such allegations, which are clearly dictated to the French Government by the German Propaganda Ministry.

In the first action against French naval units at Oran the Fleet Air Arm aircraft delivered dive-bombing attacks. Machine-guns were not used by any of our aircraft, nor were machine-guns used during the second action against the *Dunkerque* by units of the Fleet Air Arm. It will be recollected that this action was taken after Admiral Gen-soul, commanding the French naval units at Oran, had signalled that he was ordering the crews of his warships to evacuate their vessels. There should, therefore, have been no men on board the *Dunkerque* when this second action was taken by British Forces.

If further justification was needed for this painful but necessary action, it was provided by the fury of the Germans. That Hitler and his satellites had counted on obtaining possession of these fine warships was obvious. The official German news agency published the following comment :

What will the people of England have to say to this unique crime ? If they still have some feeling for honour, decency and chivalry, perhaps the long-restrained storm of disgust in regard to their Prime Minister will break forth, and then we should be surprised if they did not make short shrift and hang him in Trafalgar Square, opposite the Nelson Column.

The practical step taken by the Nazi Government was to authorize the so-called Disarmament Commission to stop the demilitarization of the surviving French warships. There remained the *Richelieu* at the French West African port of Dakar. This great dreadnought, as powerful as any war vessel afloat, had been completed but not commissioned, and had a skeleton crew on board. She was disabled by a British motor-boat dropping depth charges under her stern, and by air action. Two other dreadnoughts the *Clemenceau* and the *Gascogne*, were under construction, the former in a fairly advanced state of completion, at Brest. Her hull was wrecked by high-explosive charges before the evacuation of the port. The aeroplane-carrier *Béarn* had been immobilized in the West Indies.

Why did Admiral Gensoul not comply with any of the alternatives offered him? He was, of course, acting under the orders of the Petain Government, which, in its turn, was under German pressure. That many of his officers and ratings were willing to fight on is shown by the action of so many of their comrades. Nevertheless, the choice was a hard one. Not only did it mean exile, but many of the more influential members of the crew, the long-service men, warrant and petty officers and technicians, were married, and their families and relations were in Toulon or Brest. The Germans had worked on the feelings of these seamen from the moment of the capitulation, threatening the most diabolical

treatment of their families if they defied the official orders of the Petain Government.

The true voice of France was heard in General de Gaulle's broadcast to the French people on 8 July, 1940 :

There is not a Frenchman who has learnt without grief and anger that units of the French Fleet have been sunk by our Allies. That grief and that anger come from our very hearts. There is no reason to gloss over these feelings, and I must express them openly. Therefore, speaking to the British people, I ask them to spare us and spare themselves from any interpretation of this tragedy as a direct naval success.

It would be unfair. The French ships at Oran were in fact incapable of fighting. They were at their moorings unable to manœuvre or scatter, with officers and crews who had been corroded for a fortnight by the worst moral sufferings. They gave the British ships the advantage of the first salvos which, as everyone knows, are decisive at sea at such a short range. Their destruction is not the result of a battle. This is what a French soldier tells the British Allies all the more clearly because he respects them in naval matters.

Next, speaking to the French people, I ask them to consider things from the only point of view which must count—that of victory and liberation. The Bordeaux Government had agreed to hand over ships to the enemy's discretion. There could not be the slightest doubt that on principle and out of necessity the enemy would have used them either against Great Britain or against the French Empire, and I say without hesitation that it was better they should have been destroyed. I would rather know that the *Dunkerque*—our beautiful, our beloved, our

powerful *Dunkerque*—is aground at Oran than see her one day manned by Germans and shelling English ports, or Algiers, Casablanca, or Dakar.

The Government, which were at Bordeaux, are playing their part—the part of slaves. When trying to incite the French and British peoples against one another, the enemy are playing their part—the part of conquerors. By taking the tragedy for what it is—I mean a deplorable and detestable affair—and by saying that it should not result in a moral opposition between the British and the French, all clear-thinking men in both countries are playing their part—that of patriots.

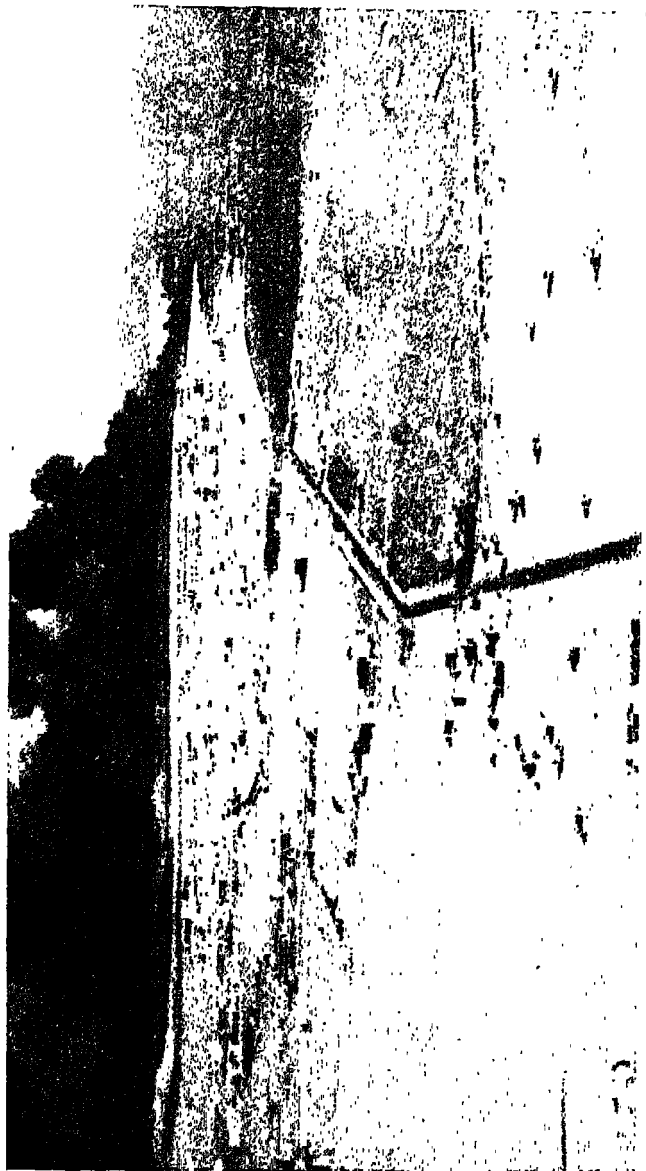
The British people cannot but realize that there could be no victory for them if the soul of France went over to the enemy. French people worthy of the name cannot but understand that the defeat of Great Britain would seal for ever their enslavement. Whatever has happened, even if one of the two has for a time fallen under the yoke of our common enemy, our two ancient peoples, our two great peoples, remain bound to one another. As for those Frenchmen who are still free to act according to honour, I say on their behalf once and for all, that they have taken their hard decision. Once and for all they have decided to fight.

In his absence, General de Gaulle was tried by the Vichy Government and sentenced to death.

## CHAPTER IV

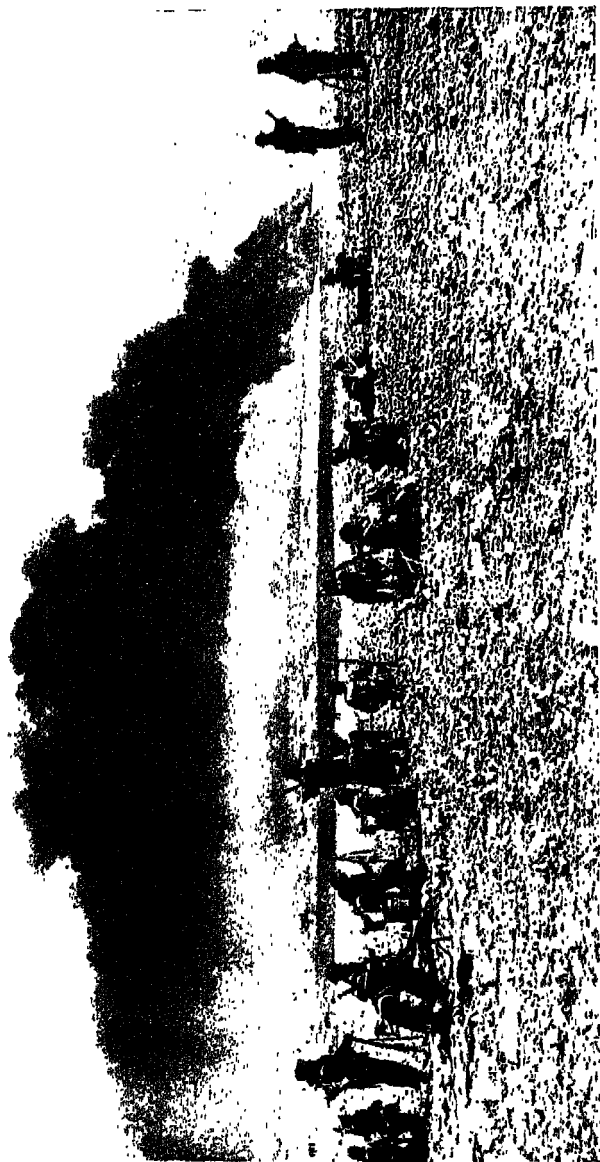
### THE DISPUTED CONTROL

**I**TALY'S FIRST OVERT ACT OF HOSTILITY against the British in the Mediterranean was to attack the island of Malta by aeroplanes flying from the nearby Sicilian aerodromes. The Maltese islands of Malta and Gozo have for long been claimed as part of the Italian irredenta. The claim is an impudent one. The Maltese, one of the oldest races in Europe, are of mixed Phœnician and Arab descent, and have no racial or linguistic affinities with Italy. Some of the old noble families are of Italian descent, and Italian used to be the official language in the Law Courts. Some of the educated classes, notably the lawyers, who used to attend Italian universities and many of the higher ecclesiastics are of Italian birth. The rank and file of the clergy, like the Maltese peasantry and labourers, speak Maltese as their mother tongue. The islands have not been under Italian rule since Roman times. There was a certain pro-Italian element in the island, but it dwindled into insignificance with the growth and development of Fascism in Italy. The great mass of the Maltese people have no sympathy with Italian Fascism, and still less with Nazism. Nevertheless, as Mussolini claimed the islands as



BURNING OIL TANKS AT TOBRUK





BRITISH INFANTRY WAITING TO ADVANCE ON TOBRUK

rightfully belonging to Italy, it is curious that he should have ordered such repeated attacks on its inhabitants. The probable explanation is that he wished to discourage our use of the dockyard and naval base.

The islanders are intensely patriotic, and withstood their ordeal by bombing with great fortitude. The defences of the islands gave as good as they received, especially after the arrival of some squadrons of Hurricanes. Italian submarines were active, but extremely unsuccessful, from the day Italy declared war on England and France. At least twenty-five of them were quickly sent to the bottom.

There were two strategical courses open to the Italian High Command. They could fight for the control of the Mediterranean, which meant defeating the British fleets stationed there, or they could avoid action. The latter course was decided upon. The personnel of the Italian Navy probably had no more enthusiasm for the war than the rest of the Italian nation.

As discussed in a previous chapter, Signor Mussolini and his immediate confederates no doubt thought that their entrance into the war in June 1940 was safe policy, as they did not anticipate British resistance to continue for very long after the capitulation of France. The policy of inactivity, however, had the expected result of weakening the morale of the crews of the Italian warships. Quite apart from racial peculiarities, this is what usually happens to

the personnel of any Navy when its leaders seek for too long to avoid battle. It is probable, also, that Mussolini really believed his own boasts about air power having superseded naval power in importance in war, and hoped to reduce the British Fleet by successful air attack. In the event it was the Italian Fleet which suffered most from air action. The decision not to challenge the British Fleet in open combat resulted in the Italian East African possessions and empire being isolated from the mother country. If it was to be a short war this was probably not considered very serious, as there had been plenty of time to accumulate munitions, food, and other war materials for the Italian garrisons.

Nor did this strategy of evasion avoid Italian naval losses. The destroyer *Espero* of 1,073 tons was encountered by our warships on 27 June, 1940, and sunk by gunfire. This was first blood to the Royal Navy. A sister ship, the destroyer *Zeffiro*, was sent to the bottom by British shells on 9 July, 1940. On July 10th aeroplanes of the Fleet Air Arm attacked the harbour of Augusta, and, besides doing other damage, sank a large destroyer of the "Navigator" type of 1,628 tons.

The honour of fighting the first action against Italian cruisers fell to a warship of the Royal Australian Navy.

Early in the morning of 19 July, 1940, H.M.A.S. *Sydney*, under the command of Captain J. A. Collins, R.A.N., was in company with a small force of

British destroyers off the north-west coast of the Island of Crete, where she was engaged in the duty of stopping Italian supplies to the Dodecanese islands, blockaded from the day Italy intervened. Commander H. St. L. Nicholson, D.S.O., R.N., led our destroyers. As day broke, the *Sydney* sighted two Italian cruisers of the "Condottieri" class. These are light cruisers of 5,000 tons, which have developed the very high speed on their trials of 37 knots. They are armed with eight 6-inch guns, six 4-inch guns, and four torpedo tubes, and were completed in 1931-32. The *Sydney*, completed in 1935, has a displacement of 6,800 tons, a speed of 32½ knots, and carries a main armament of eight 6-inch guns. In addition, she mounts four anti-aircraft guns of 4-inch calibre, eighteen small guns, and eight torpedo tubes. In theory, the Italians were in superior force, despite the presence of a small number of destroyers on the British side. Directly the opponents sighted each other, the Italians turned and made off at top speed. One of them, the *Bartolomeo Colleoni*, was within gunshot of the *Sydney*, and, before she could open the range sufficiently, was struck by a salvo of 6-inch shells which reduced her speed. Her destruction was soon completed, the other cruiser making good her escape. One of the British destroyers was dispatched to save the crew of the stricken vessel, and rescued 250 officers and ratings.

Apart from these actions, the Italian Fleet was

successful for some time in avoiding combat with the Royal Navy, though the destroyer *Artigliere*, of 1,620 tons, was sunk in action on 11 October, 1940, by H.M.S. *Ajax* and *York*.

Italy, and Northern Italy in particular, was, however, soon to learn the meaning of modern war. The great industrial cities of the north were repeatedly and successfully attacked by bombers of the Royal Air Force, concentrating particularly on the Italian aeroplane, automobile, and munition factories. These long flights over the Alps were accomplished in all kinds of weather and with remarkably few casualties. An account of the first attack on Milan and Turin is best given in the words of a young Canadian pilot who joined the Royal Air Force in 1936 :

On our first trip to Italy our squadron was told that we were to make an attack on aircraft factories in Northern Italy. Some of us were to go to Milan and some to Turin. I was the second pilot in one of the aircraft sent to the Fiat Works at Turin. At that time France was still in the war, so we could use the end of the day for flying over French territory without fear of being shot at. We took off from our forward base at nine o'clock at night, crossing much of France by daylight. We could see the vineyards green below us, and stretches of well-wooded country. It all looked very peaceful : flying conditions, though, were pretty bad. There were thunder-storms and a lot of cloud, but our aircraft could take it. I learned when we got back that one had been struck by lightning—but it still came home safely.

We avoided Switzerland, of course, but we could see

Geneva in the distance brilliantly lit up, and its appearance made it obvious that it was a city in a country still at peace. As we flew on we had to climb into high cloud to get over the Alps, and ice began to form on the aircraft. There was not very much ice on our machine because the captain went only high enough to clear the mountain tops.

We came down and found thin clouds at 5,000 feet. Some lights were visible below us and we dropped flares which lit up the river. We had arrived where we wanted to, dead on time, pin-pointing our target exactly by the light of the flares.

We flew over the target twice. There was some scattered anti-aircraft fire which missed us, and it seemed as though they were just putting it into the sky anyhow. Making a normal run up I dropped the first stick of bombs, which served to register the target.

Then we cruised around and let the whole lot go. It was an easy mark and we could not miss. The tail-gunner saw the bombs burst across the end of the section we were attacking. We had been instructed to bomb the aircraft works, not the motor car section, and this we did.

We could see the blue flames of explosions follow the bomb bursts. Then the other aircraft came in and for an hour the place was well and truly bombed. Big green fires were blazing and a large column of smoke rose into the air. Production must definitely have been stopped in that plant, at any rate for the time being.

As we climbed again we could still see the flares and the flashes from the anti-aircraft guns which still couldn't find us. We re-crossed the Alps, which were again invisible behind the clouds, and made for home. Altogether the flight took a few minutes short of ten hours, and when we came down at our aerodrome I had a sleep with the pleasant feeling that the trip had been successful and that we had put our bombs on the correct spot.

My next trip to Italy took place recently. I went in the same machine, but this time I was captain of aircraft. France had by now gone out of the war, so conditions were rather different.

We flew at 7,000 feet and climbed gradually to 9,000. Once more everything went like clockwork, thanks to our navigator. This time we had the most marvellous view of the Alps by moonlight. There was Mont Blanc towering up, like a policeman on point duty, showing us which way to turn. As we skimmed the tops of the mountains we could see the clouds lying in the valleys like cottonwool. Cloud banks rising high on the far side looked at first like more mountains.

"We will have to go up higher," said the second pilot, but I assured him that it was only cloud. Coming down we dropped our flare on the target and then bombed it. There was little anti-aircraft fire. We made three runs and attacked with three sticks, which undoubtedly hit the target and started fires. Other aircraft followed us, increasing the fires and scoring hits with heavy bombs. The roof of the factory was pierced and one high explosive bomb burst right inside the building. Incendiaries were dropped on the roof, and there followed several fires and two large explosions.

We had finished. We circled for height before reaching the Alps, crossed them easily, and made for home. It was a perfectly straightforward journey and we crossed the English Channel at dawn.

We were all a bit tired but very satisfied, for it had been a successful and easy trip, and we knew we had got results that would shake up the Italians.

Naples was attacked for the first time on 31 October, 1940. The assault was made in two waves, the first bombers concentrating on the oil refinery and

group of storage tanks at Poggioreale on the southern outskirts of the city. They were heavily damaged. The opposition from ground defences was slight and ineffective. The second raid that night was made on the station and railway junction in Naples itself, some of our aircraft flying over the city at a height of less than 2,000 feet. A third raid was made that night on the anti-aircraft batteries and search-lights. One battery was completely silenced. One of the most successful attacks on Turin was made early in November 1940, and this is the description of it by a twenty-four-year-old sergeant pilot of the R.A.F. :

From our point of view there isn't a great deal to say about a trip over the Alps to Turin. Many people have done it and I hope a lot more will do it again before long. Just the same, when we were briefed for the Italian show I was a bit more excited than usual, because I had been looking for that job for some time. I had missed it six times before, but last week-end was different. The chance came again and I got there and back successfully.

We were timed to be first over the target and part of our job was to see that it was well lit up. We did that, and we all found the target and all dropped our stuff. There wasn't one of us who came back without having had a good crack, and having left some cheering fires down below to show we'd been there. For a while we have been having some rather bad luck with the rain-makers on the long runs, but our aircraft are stout and will stand up to most of the stuff they deal out to us in the way of weather. But this time the weather was fine.

We had a good moon crossing France, but there was a



bit of cloud down below and we couldn't make out the country clearly. Until we were about half an hour's run from the Alps, we were flying about 8,000 feet so that we avoided the need of climbing steeply when we reached the peaks. With the ranges in sight, we put the nose of the bomber up and easily made the few thousand feet extra for a perfectly simple crossing, and the sight of the Alps was about the only interesting and unusual thing in the run. Night bombing trips are a bit monotonous as a rule.

But the Alps in the moonlight are different from the country we generally fly over. They are worth all the trouble, just to look at. They seemed to be near enough for us to reach out and touch them, covered with snow and glistening sharply in the light, rising like a string of castle walls a bit broken in places, trying to bar our way. Still, wonderful as they were to look at, they were to be crossed, as we had a job of work to do on the other side of them. We were on our way to Turin and to a special part of the Fiat works.

Well, after we had crossed the mountains and when I thought we ought to be over the target, I dropped a few flares and picked out the exact spot we had been told to make for. There was a large oval nearby, from which we could check our position. Below us in the light of the flares, Turin shone dully. The town stretched away, with the rectangles of buildings and intersecting streets and then we saw our target.

At that moment the anti-aircraft gunners started up, just shooting at the sky. They did not seem to be shooting at us—just shooting anywhere. I made my runs as soon as we were dead sure of our target and came in in a gliding attack, quite untouched by the defences.

Over the target, we dropped the heavy stuff followed by some incendiaries. Our bombs burst on the target right enough while the incendiaries started some fires in

the area. While this was going on, it was light enough to take a photograph. The Italians certainly couldn't say we hadn't been there, because we got that picture and it showed exactly where we were, works and landmarks and all.

When the others came in, it was a pretty strong attack, and stick after stick of high explosive bombs went well and truly home. A large fire had got a good hold and made a fine mark. We saw the explosions of the bombs from other aircraft working on the target and much bigger explosions that meant parts of the works had blown up. They were certainly not bombs going off, no bombs could cause such explosions.

Someone else had a crack at the marshalling yard or railway sidings and lit fires there, which started a chain of explosions that kept going for a good fifteen minutes. We had done our job. The target had been well plastered and there were some good fires going, so we started for home.

To make the return flight we needed quite a lot more height, so we circled over the city and began to climb. The Alps seemed to come forward to meet us, and for a few minutes it looked as though we might have to thread our way through one or other of the mountain passes. But in the end we found we had gained enough height to clear the mountains.

After that we felt that the show was over and the curtain had dropped. We might have been in a London bus, coming home, our run was just as steady and as regular.

The Italian Air Force attempted to reply to these attacks with indifferent success. The dispatch of a bomber squadron of the Italian Air Force to aerodromes in occupied France in order to take part in the air attacks on London and other British cities was for propaganda purposes, and a fiasco.

The Palestinian city and port of Haifa were raided from Rhodes, and the Egyptian port of Alexandria from the Italian aerodromes in Libya. British convoys were attacked from the air on a number of occasions, but it is fair to say that, generally speaking, the Italian Air Force was inefficient. Technical development had lagged behind, the fighter aeroplanes were slow and under-gunned compared with our Spitfires and Hurricanes, and the training of our pilots had been more thorough. In the long-drawn-out fighting in East Africa during General Wavell's brilliant campaign which led to the overrunning of Libya, and in the fighting in Greece and Albania, the Royal Air Force established everywhere an ascendancy over the Italian Air Force. Better training, better pilots, better machines, and good operational direction working on a well-thought-out plan had their expected results. Probably the greatest surprise the Italians had was on 21 December, 1940, when a force of heavy bombers operating from aerodromes in England passed over Venice and bombed the docks and petroleum works at the nearby Porto Marghera. To carry out this operation our aircraft had to cross the German-occupied territories in France, coming under heavy gunfire on their passage, and then fly over the Alps at a height of over 17,000 feet and a temperature of minus 30 degrees.

The Royal Air Force in this important Middle

East Command was in charge of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, K.C.B., D.S.O. By Christmas Day, 1940, he was well justified in sending the following message to his command :

As Air Officer Commander-in-Chief I send my Christmas greetings to all ranks of the Royal Air Force, the Royal Australian Air Force, and the South African Air Force in the Middle East. Whether pilots, air crews, ground crews, or staff, you have all played your part splendidly in maintaining the high traditions of your service. With our ever increasing resources and the high morale of our squadrons, we shall look forward to a victorious New Year and a really proper Christmas in the years to come.

On 28 October, 1940, at three o'clock in the morning, the Italian Minister in Athens presented an ultimatum to the Greek Government which he stated expired at 6 a.m. It demanded the instant capitulation of Greece, with whom Italy was supposed to be at peace, the right of entry for Italian forces into Greek territory, and the cession of certain strategic points. When asked what these strategic points were, the Italian diplomat had to confess his ignorance. This treatment and the ultimatum itself were rightly regarded by the Greek Government as a declaration of war. The late General Metaxas, Prime Minister, and his Cabinet, rejected the ultimatum without hesitation, and appealed to the British Government for assistance under our guarantee. Hostilities immediately began on the

Greco-Albanian frontier, where the Italians had massed a large army. The initial invasion of Greek territory, the defeat of the Italian armies, and the occupation of a large part of Southern Albania by the much smaller Greek force was the opening chapter in a far larger campaign to be described presently.

From the beginning, as in all the fighting in this great campaign, the Greek soldiers, sailors, and airmen fought throughout with the greatest gallantry and skill. The attack on the kingdom of Greece was without provocation or valid excuse. It was as dastardly an act of aggression as the German onslaughts on Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, and Belgium, and the subsequent German attacks on Yugoslavia and Greece herself.

It will long be argued whether it was sound strategy for our none too numerous reserves in Egypt and the Middle East to be depleted by answering the call for assistance. It is arguable that we might have contented ourselves by rendering naval help without weakening ourselves in so doing. Public sentiment in Britain was certainly in favour of rendering all possible help to the Greeks. There were practical reasons for this assistance, apart from the honourable obligation under our guarantee. The Greek aerodromes were well placed for aerial operations against the southern Italian cities. The Greek harbours and islands are of strategical importance. Probably the most important islands from the naval

point of view are Cephalonia, in which is the splendid harbour of Argostoli, commanding the entrance to the Adriatic, Corfu itself, the large island of Crete, with several good anchorages and one good harbour at Suda Bay, and the island of Lemnos, also with a good harbour, commanding the entrance to the Dardanelles. For the Italians and Germans to have the use of these outlying positions, and particularly Crete and Lemnos, would have been dangerous to our position in the Eastern Mediterranean. It would have been more difficult, for example, for reinforcements and supplies to be sent to Turkey in the event of a German onslaught on that country. By arrangement with the Greek Government, the island of Crete was occupied by British forces. Apart from this, no troops were sent, the idea being not to provoke Germany to join in the attack on Greece. German sources, indeed, put about the report, and it was unfortunately believed in some circles, that Mussolini had acted contrary to Hitler's wishes in making war on Greece at all. This, of course, was utter nonsense. The Italian attack on Greece was part of the larger Axis plan.

There is, however, some reason to believe that the Italians were taken by surprise when the Greeks resisted so tenaciously. Apparently, Mussolini expected the Greeks to make a show of resistance and then to give way; or, alternatively, that his more numerous armies, with their modern equipment, and supported by a large Air Force, could brush

aside all opposition, and occupy the whole country in a comparatively short time. We did give considerable naval help, our Fleet entering the Adriatic and bombarding the Italian ports of Valona, Santi Quaranta, and Durazzo with great effect.

We also sent equipment of all kinds, including motor lorries, which the Greeks needed badly, and an effective reinforcement of aircraft. The Royal Air Force operating in Greece played a great part in making possible the victorious advance of the meagre Greek forces across the rugged mountainous country of Southern Albania. With a little more time and a little more force the Greeks could have taken the fine port of Valona. Greece also brought a welcome reinforcement in her large mercantile marine and a small, but well-trained fleet.

Besides torpedo-boats and other small craft, the Greek Navy consisted of the armoured cruiser *Averoff*, ten modern torpedo-boat-destroyers, and six ocean-going submarines. The *Averoff* is a powerful vessel of 9,450 tons, mounting as main armament four 9.2-inch guns and eight 7.5-inch guns. Built in Italy and completed in 1910, she had been re-boilered and reconstructed in France in 1925-27.

The Greek minelaying cruiser *Helle* was torpedoed and sunk by an Italian submarine on 15 August, 1940. The warship, at a time when Greece was in peaceful relations with all other States, was participating in a religious celebration

and pilgrimage to the sacred island of Tinos: This crime was as worthy of the Italian Navy as the bombing of the earthquake-stricken town of Larissa by the Italian Air Force. When the victorious Greek Army occupied the Albanian port of Santi Quaranta on 4 December, 1940, they captured an Italian destroyer lying there damaged after a bombing attack by the R.A.F.

If it was right to stand by Greece when she was attacked by Italy, how could we escape helping her to the best of our ability when she was threatened by the more powerful Axis partner; and, as troops were obviously needed as well as naval and aerial assistance, the decision to send land forces could scarcely be avoided. It must be remembered that at this time we were hoping for the rebuilding of a defensive alliance between Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey. The landing of British troops in Greece could hardly be kept secret, especially with the German Legation still in Athens swearing peaceful intentions, and this new British Expeditionary Force, largely composed as it was of magnificent Australian and New Zealand soldiers, encouraged Yugoslav resistance.

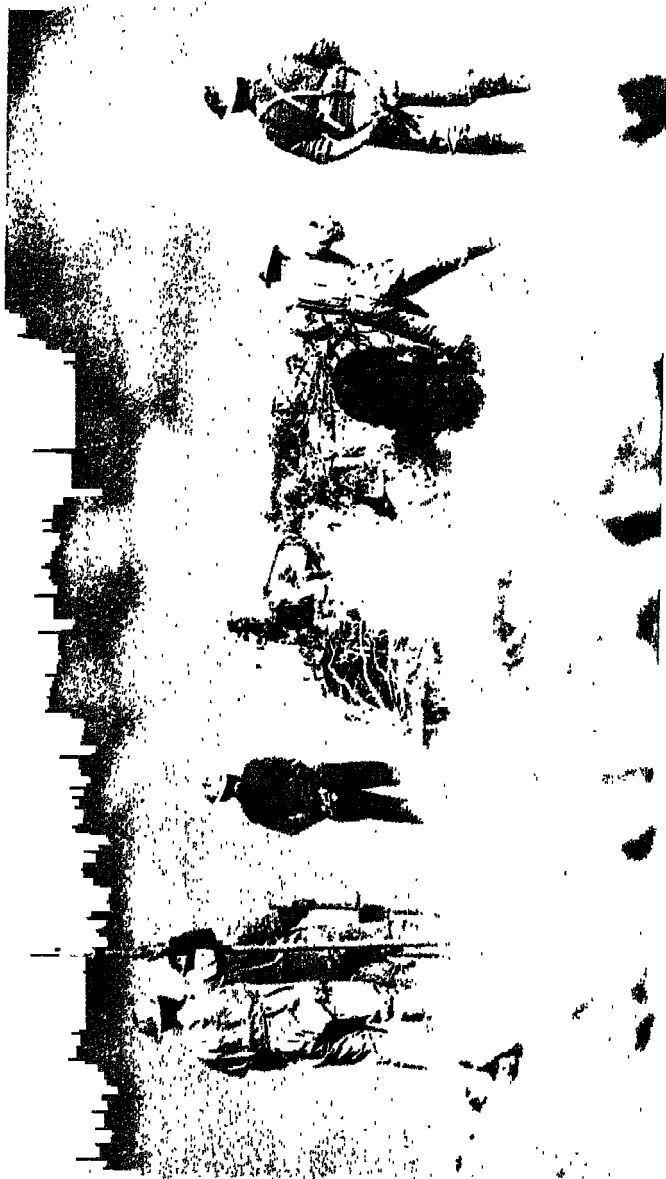
I am here dealing in the main with the initial help given to Greece, and if this was right our only mistake was in not sending greater forces from the beginning, and subsequently. If these forces, or their equipment, or the shipping to carry them was not available, then we could only do our best, and



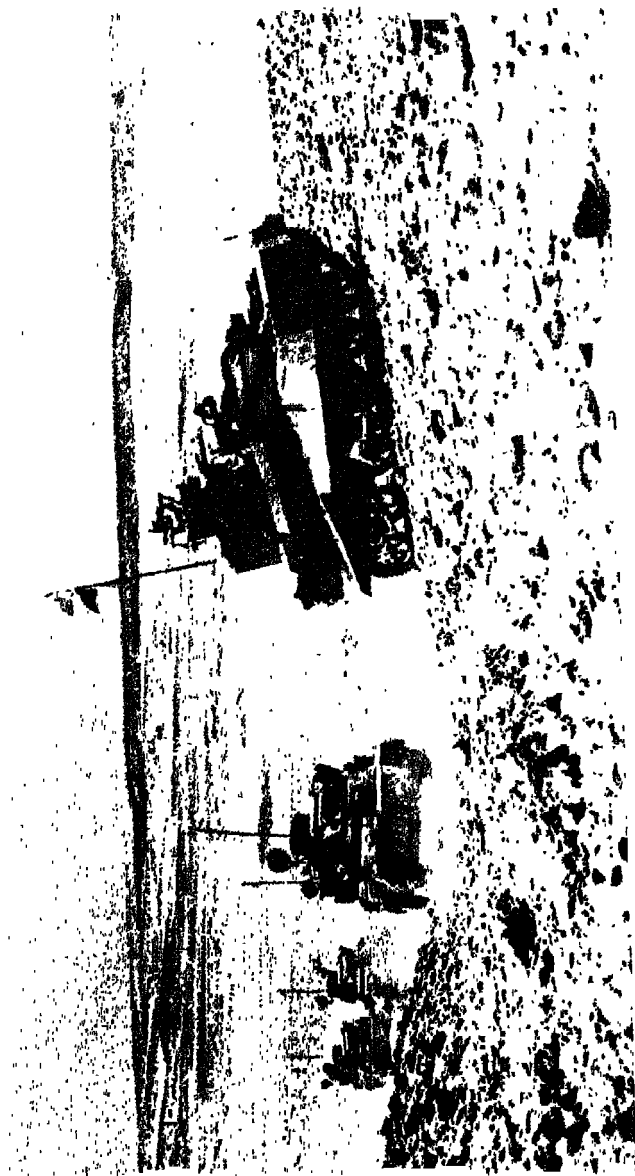
send what we had. It must be remembered, also, that the Greeks were determined to defend themselves alone if necessary against Italy or Germany, or both in combination. They were certainly worthy of all the help we could give them.

General Papagos, Commander-in-Chief of the Greek Army, has emerged from these sombre events with unsullied glory and a military reputation second to none. Under his brilliant leadership the small Greek Army and Air Force, outnumbered and short of modern equipment, faced the long-prepared Italian invasion without flinching. The Italians were outfought and outmanœuvred from the beginning. Driven back deeply into Albania, they faced complete defeat in the summer, when the mountain passes were open. They were saved from this disaster by German and Bulgarian intervention. When Germany threatened to invade in her turn, General Papagos and his soldiers prepared to meet the new onslaught on their Serbian and Bulgarian frontiers, and fought till the bitter end against hopeless odds.

What manner of man is Papagos? He was fifty-five years of age at the outbreak of war with Italy. His military staff training has been completed in France and Belgium. A good linguist, he has always been known as an admirer of England and bitterly hostile to Italy. In 1932 he was a brigadier and in 1933 became Inspector of Cavalry. In 1934 Papagos was promoted to Major-General, and in



BRITISH HOWITZER BOMBARDING BARDIA



BRITISH LIGHT TANKS IN THE WESTERN DESERT

1935 was appointed to command the third Army Corps. In the same year General Metaxas promoted him Lieutenant-General, and made him Minister of War. In 1939 he became Chief of the General Staff.

A tall, thin man with aquiline and aristocratic features, he is austere and reserved in manner. A born leader of men, who never allowed the successes of his troops to affect his judgment or their reverses to shake his nerve or his grasp of the situation, he was great in victory, and greater in defeat.<sup>1</sup>

Whether it was sound strategy to send help to Greece or not, the possibility of affording this assistance depended on our exercising a working command of the sea. Those four words "command of the sea" have caused much misunderstanding amongst the lay public, including many of the politicians. They look at maps and fail to realize the immense extent of the oceans. Working or practical command means that the naval power exercising it is able to carry on its own trade and commerce, though, except under the most favourable circumstances, losses will be suffered from enemy raiders. Thus, in the years following the great victory of Trafalgar, when we had undisputed command of the seas, French privateers took heavy toll of our commerce right up to the end of the Napoleonic wars.

In the war of 1914-18, and in this war, our command has been effective, and yet we have suffered

<sup>1</sup> Papagos was arrested by Greek quislings after the final capitulation of the Greek armies on the mainland.

heavy depredations from enemy submarines and other raiders. The difference, however, between our commerce and that of Germany and Italy, is that it expects to arrive at its port of destination, and usually does, whereas it is a gamble for the enemy commerce to put to sea, and a fluke for it to arrive. Yet we have not this command in all the seas. Thus, we do not dispute the German control in the Black Sea or Baltic Sea for geographical reasons. We were unable to prevent the sea-borne invasion of Norway because it was too dangerous to exercise naval control within such easy reach of German aerodromes. In the Mediterranean we have been able, even after the intervention of Italy, to send important convoys as we willed to Greece or Egypt. On the other hand, we were unable altogether to prevent the transport of supply ships across the Adriatic to Albania from Italy. So also because of the vulnerability of Malta to air attack and the great distance of other safe bases we were unable altogether to prevent the passage of transport and supply ships with German and Italian forces and munitions from Italy to Libya. On the other hand, large armies, with their equipment, have been transported from the beginning of the present war from Australia, New Zealand, and India for the African combat areas and to Malaya. At the beginning of the present war we sent an army of over 150,000 men with the most elaborate equipment to France without appreciable interference; and we evacuated our hard-pressed

troops and thousands of their French comrades from Dunkirk and the northern French ports after the débâcle in the Low Countries and the loss of the Battle of France.

It will presently be explained how General Wavell's first conquest of Libya was made possible by our command of the Eastern Mediterranean, exercised from Alexandria. There our Fleet was able to give direct and indirect assistance to the invading Army without challenge from the Italian Fleet ; while no such assistance could be given by the warships of our enemy to their own troops. Again, when the counter-attack on Libya was made by the German and Italian reinforcements, we were able to hamper their advance and assist our own operations by warships, again without interference from the enemy at sea. During the various campaigns we carried out heavy bombardments of such ports as Tripoli in North Africa, and the Italian ports of disembarkation in Albania were assailed by shell-fire without the opposing Navy attempting any diversion. As it had been decided to aid the Greeks and also take the offensive in the Western Desert against Libya, heavy reinforcements were required, and the passage round the Cape of Good Hope would have taken too long. At the end of August and beginning of September 1940, therefore, important naval movements were begun, the eastern and western squadrons of the Mediterranean Fleet working in conjunction. Their object was to bring

the Italian Fleet to action, if possible, and also to cover the passage of very important convoys with troops and supplies for the North African and Balkan theatres of war.

On 31st August, 1940, Italian warships were reported at sea. The submarine *Parthian* (Lieut.-Commander M. G. Rimington, R.N.), was able to make contact on this day with an Italian force of cruisers and destroyers, and obtained two hits. Air reconnaissance now reported the enemy main fleet, consisting of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers as being at sea 150 miles away from our Eastern Mediterranean squadron. Every effort was made to engage them, but as soon as the enemy air scouts reported our Navy approaching, the Italian Fleet turned about and made at full speed for its base at Taranto. The western squadron, operating from Gibraltar, was now operating off Sardinia and Sicily, accompanied by the aircraft-carrier *Ark Royal*. They likewise were unable to make contact with enemy warships, but Swordfish aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm carried out a heavy bombardment of the aerodrome at Elma, in Sardinia, on September 1st, and on the aerodrome at Cagliari in Sicily the next day. On September 2nd a detachment of our warships south-west of Malta was heavily attacked by German dive-bombers of the Ju. 87 type. This was the first time that the Luftwaffe had shown itself in force in the Mediterranean. The results were not encouraging for the Nazis. Five of them were shot

down by Fulmar and Gladiator fighters of the Fleet Air Arm, and the anti-aircraft guns of the Fleet, and four others were chased almost to Sicily and damaged. Not a single hit was scored on any of our warships.

On 4 September, 1940, Swordfish bombers from the aircraft-carrier accompanying the squadron attacked the Italian aerodromes at Maritza and Calato simultaneously. At Maritza the two main hangars were hit, and the petrol stores, barracks, and repair shops set on fire.

At Calato the Italian planes were on the ground. A number were destroyed. Their ammunition dump was blown up, and the buildings surrounding the landing ground, including the barracks used by the Italian pilots and aerodrome personnel, set on fire.

The eastern squadron now turned towards the Ægean Sea, and, finding no enemy warships, unleashed the Swordfish bombers of the Fleet Air Arm to attack Italian aerodromes in the Dodecanese Islands. These were heavily bombed on September 4th at a cost of four of our aircraft, the crews of three of them being made prisoners by the Italians. Eight Italian aircraft were shot down, and six damaged. The island of Rhodes next received attention, its aerodromes being bombed, and military objectives shelled from the sea by H.M.A.S. *Sydney* (Captain J. A. Collins, C.B., R.A.N.), and H.M.S. *Orion* (Captain G. R. B. Back).

The aerodromes at Makri Yalo, also in the



Dodecanese, were shelled, and not one of the hangars and other buildings around them left standing. Here there was a counter-attack by enemy warships. It was delivered by the smallest type of Italian men-of-war. Five motor-torpedo-boats put out from the harbour of Pegadia, near the aerodrome, and were promptly intercepted by the destroyer *Ilex* (Lieut.-Commander P. L. Saumarez, R.N.). This was part of the mosquito fleet which Mussolini had for long boasted would create such havoc with the British Fleet. Three actually moved to the attack. Two were sunk and the third damaged. The remaining two motor-torpedo-boats made off at top speed without attempting to develop an attack. Then the Italian aeroplanes took a hand in the business, two being shot down into the sea, and three damaged.

These highly successful operations covered important reinforcements and supplies, including munitions and equipment for the Greeks. As explained, it was impossible to bring the Italian Fleet to action. Our fleets had covered the main areas of the Mediterranean. It was, therefore, necessary to attack Mussolini's Navy in its own fortified harbours.

## CHAPTER V

### ECLIPSE OF ITALIAN SEA POWER

THE BEGINNING OF NOVEMBER 1940 WAS a period during which crippling blows were struck at Italian sea power in the Mediterranean, from which it has never recovered. It also saw tremendous and successful activity by our Mediterranean Fleet. When the land campaigns in North Africa are described it will be explained how Marshal Graziani's great army, after delay due to the brilliant harassing tactics of the Army of the Nile, advanced to Sidi Barrani, and there, apparently, stuck fast. Great fortified encampments were established by the Italians, and shore batteries mounted on the sea front to guard the left flank of the Italian line of positions. On the night of November 9th and 10th a detachment of the Mediterranean Fleet closed in on Sidi Barrani and carried out a heavy bombardment. Their fire was answered by the shore batteries, but our ships sustained no damage and no casualties whatsoever. This damaging action against the Italian land forces encamped on Egyptian territory did not tempt the Italian Fleet out into the open.

Two days later a force of British destroyers raided into the Adriatic through the Straits of Otranto, and there encountered a convoy of four Italian

transports, escorted by two destroyers. The escorting warships fled immediately, but one was heavily damaged by our guns in the course of the engagement. Of the four Italian transports, one was sunk, two more were set on fire, and left in a sinking condition, and one heavily damaged. The escorting destroyers did not score a single hit on our vessels. The western squadron of our Fleet operating from Gibraltar was also at sea. Its duty was to act as a covering force for the aircraft-carrier *Ark Royal* under the command of Captain C. S. Holland, R.N. As soon as this combined squadron had arrived at a convenient distance from Sardinia the *Ark Royal's* bombing aeroplanes took the air, and carried out a heavy bombing attack on the harbour and aerodrome at Cagliari, in Sardinia. A large number of bombs were dropped in the target area. Though there was no opposition from the Italian Navy, enemy bombers attacked the *Ark Royal*, but made no hits. The great aircraft-carrier suffered neither damage nor casualties. On the contrary, her fighter aeroplanes shot down two of the enemy aircraft, and damaged others. We did not lose a single machine in this operation.

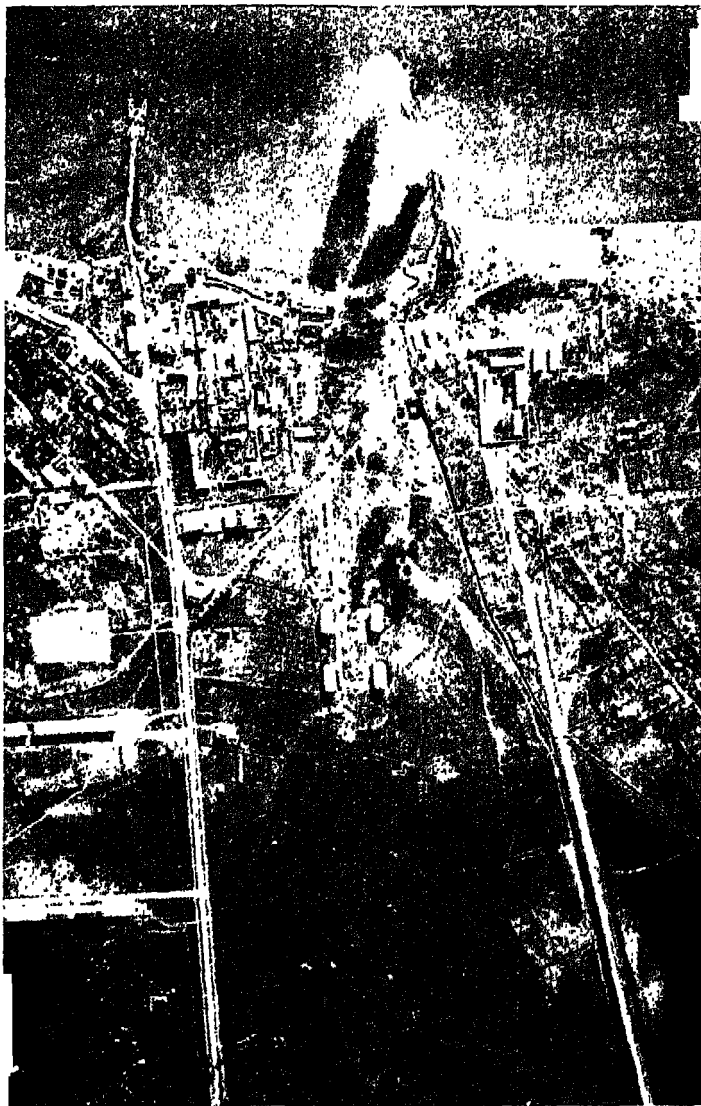
On the same night, that of November 11th and 12th, the great air attack on the Italian main fleet anchored in the harbour of Taranto was carried out in full moonlight. The naval port was strongly defended by anti-aircraft batteries and a balloon barrage. The raid was the greatest success scored by the Fleet Air Arm at that time. The results were



CAPTURED ITALIAN GENERALS AND STAFFS ARRIVING AT CAIRO



R.A.F. PILOT WITH SPOILS OF VICTORY, WEARING AN  
ITALIAN OFFICER'S HAT



R.A.F. BOMBING VALONA HARBOUR



ITALIAN RIFLES AND MACHINE-GUNS CAPTURED AT BARDIA

remarkable. It will be remembered that the Italian battle fleet at the time of Mussolini's intervention in the war consisted of six ships-of-the-line. Two of these of the "Littorio" class had just been completed and commissioned. They were as powerful as any warships in the world, with a displacement of 35,000 tons. The rest of the Italian line of battle consisted of four ships of the "Cavour" class, all of which had been reconstructed and modernized. Half this line of battle was put out of action, and two cruisers were sunk. The losses include one of the "Littorios" and two of the "Cavours". Two cruisers were also sunk. Air reconnaissance showed the following picture of the state of the Italian Fleet in Taranto as a result of this very fine action. The "Littorio" class battleship was down by the bows, with her forecastle under water and the hull listing heavily over to one side. One battleship of the "Cavour" class had been beached with her whole stern up to and including the after-turret under the sea, and her hull listed over to one side. The second damaged "Cavour" class battleship was aground and abandoned, only the forward part of her upper works being above water. All these ships were in the outer harbour. In the inner harbour the two cruisers were lying on the bottom, their hulls listed over to one side; and, in addition, two fleet auxiliaries had their sterns under water. There is reason to believe that even this was not the full extent of the damage. Four shapes like the hulls of warships could be seen under



water off the entrance to the graving dock in the inner harbour. It is possible that these were additional vessels, perhaps destroyers, sunk either by the torpedo-carrying aircraft or by the bombers of the Royal Air Force, which, operating from the Greek aerodromes, carried out a heavy attack on the harbour basins and warships in the port the following night.

If the British and Italian Fleets had met at sea, and half the Italian battle line had been put out of action, it would have been considered a brilliant victory. It would have been more remarkable still if our own Fleet had escaped damage. Our losses actually were two aircraft shot down, the crews being taken prisoner. Signor Mussolini and his naval advisers had for long boasted before the war that Italian air power would nullify British sea power. In the event, it was British naval air power, in other words, the Fleet Air Arm operating from aircraft-carriers, the latter being escorted by warships, which struck this crippling blow at the Italian Fleet.

The aircraft were flown from the new aircraft-carrier *Formidable*. They were Skuas and Swordfish type. These machines have been specially designed for use from aircraft-carriers, and are the nearest thing to the German dive-bomber we have developed. They can carry either bombs or torpedoes. On this occasion the damage was done by torpedoes, a form of operation in which the Fleet

Air Arm has specialized. A very high degree of training and skill as well as great daring are required for an attack by torpedo-carrying aircraft. The torpedoes, which are practically the same as those carried by warships, are slung underneath the carriage of the aircraft, and must be released within ten or twelve feet of the surface of the sea, and pointing accurately towards the target. As they are released the engines are started, and on reaching the sea the torpedoes automatically pick up their depth, and should speed towards the target in the direction in which they are pointing. The aircraft must, therefore, dive much closer to the sea than the dive-bomber on land need approach the surface of the ground.

For good chances of a hit, the torpedoes should be released close to the target. During the approach, the dive, and the actual attack, the aircraft are exposed to anti-aircraft fire.

Torpedo-carrying aircraft, like so many other war inventions, were first produced and perfected by the British. They were used in the war of 1914-18, and scored successes against Turkish vessels in the Dardanelles operations. Despite this, there was a good deal of scepticism among the more senior naval officers as to the value of this new weapon. It was neglected in the last war, and only tardily developed in this. It must be remembered, however, that the Royal Navy has only had its own Fleet Air Arm in recent years. It is in direct line of descent

from the old Royal Naval Air Service, which was transferred to the new Royal Air Force towards the end of the last war. The reason for the establishment of a separate Air Ministry and a separate Air Force was valid at the time. Neither the old-fashioned admirals nor the old-style generals could adjust their minds to the new air weapon nor visualize its potentialities. There was cold-shouldering in both services, and a certain amount of professional jealousy. In despair, the airmen appealed successfully to the politicians, and the Royal Air Force was established. The newer school of naval officers had always regretted this. No sooner had the old Royal Naval Air Service become part of the Royal Air Force than an agitation began for the Fleet to have its own air arm once more. Certainly, the present generation of senior officers at sea are fully alive to the importance of the Air Arm. Since the separate Fleet Arm was re-established, they have done their best to make up for lost time.

Fortunately, we are strong in aircraft-carriers. There were doubts about the value of these large and costly vessels, and a controversy has raged amongst naval officers all over the world, and of all nationalities, as to their practical value. The argument against them is that they are vulnerable because of their great size and unwieldy in that in operations at sea they must turn head to wind in order that their aircraft can fly off their vast decks.

In the decade preceding the outbreak of the

present war, the pro-aircraft-carrier school had prevailed in what I may describe as the ocean-going navies. Ourselves, the Americans, and the Japanese have all invested heavily in aircraft-carriers ; and we had a large building programme in hand and well advanced when the present war broke out. The anti-aircraft-carrier school, fortunately, as events have proved, prevailed in Italy and Germany, and neither Navy possessed one of this useful type in September 1939, though the Germans had two building. In the Taranto attack and on subsequent occasions the aircraft-carriers have fully justified themselves. They have also proved most useful in wider operations outside the Mediterranean, such as hunting for enemy raiders in the Atlantic. That aircraft-carriers are vulnerable is demonstrably true, as the loss of the *Courageous* and *Glorious*, older vessels of this type, the first by submarine attack and the second by gunfire in the Norwegian operations have shown. But they are not so vulnerable as the Germans pretend, with their frequent claims to have sunk the *Ark Royal*. The aircraft-carrier *Illustrious* survived the concentrated attacks of the German dive-bombers in the Sicilian Channel in the following January.

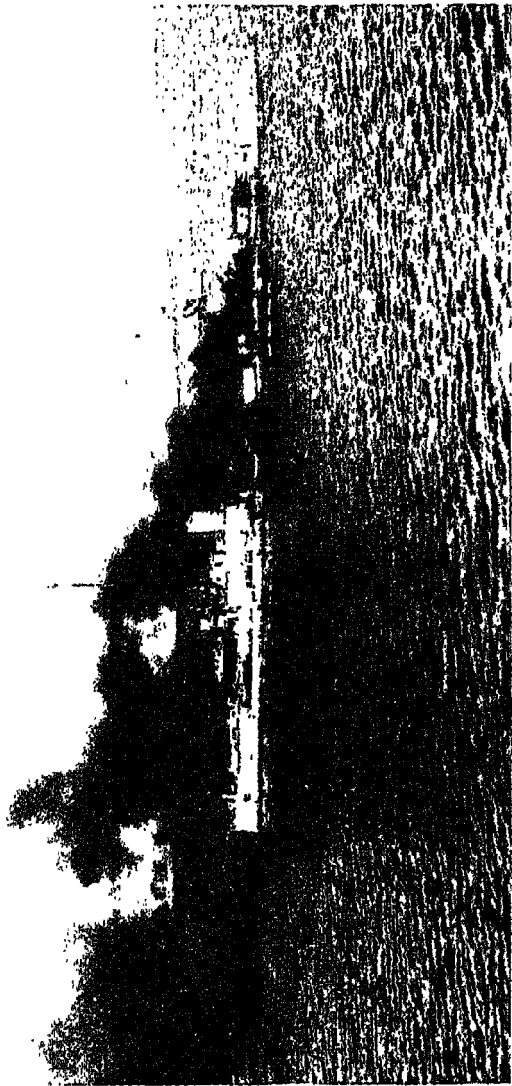
All modern battleships and cruisers carry their own aircraft. They are usually reconnaissance machines, used for scouting or for spotting for the guns when firing at long ranges. They are catapulted from the upper deck, as there is no room in

the ordinary warship for anything in the nature of a runway. It is only the aircraft-carriers, however, which can accommodate and fly off aircraft capable of carrying heavy bombs or torpedoes. The aircraft carrier has the advantage of being able to accommodate these, and fighters as well, in considerable numbers.

The successful attack at Taranto had important and far-reaching results. The main Italian Fleet was so crippled that the combined operations for the conquest of Libya could be embarked upon with little fear of interference from the Italian Fleet. The naval harbour of Taranto was not unnaturally regarded as unhealthy by the Italian High Command, and the surviving warships were sent to other ports on the west coast of Italy. On 27 November, 1940, the Italian Fleet received another mauling, this time from the Western Mediterranean squadron under the command of Vice-Admiral Sir James Somerville, flying his flag in the battle-cruiser *Renown*. At ten o'clock in the morning our squadron, operating from Gibraltar, was approaching the coast of Sardinia when reports were received from our reconnaissance aircraft that an Italian fleet, consisting of two battleships and a large number of cruisers and destroyers, was at sea about seventy-five miles to the north-eastward. Admiral Somerville's squadron immediately increased to full speed, and made towards the enemy. Just after noon, four Italian cruisers were sighted. They were so far away that only their mast-

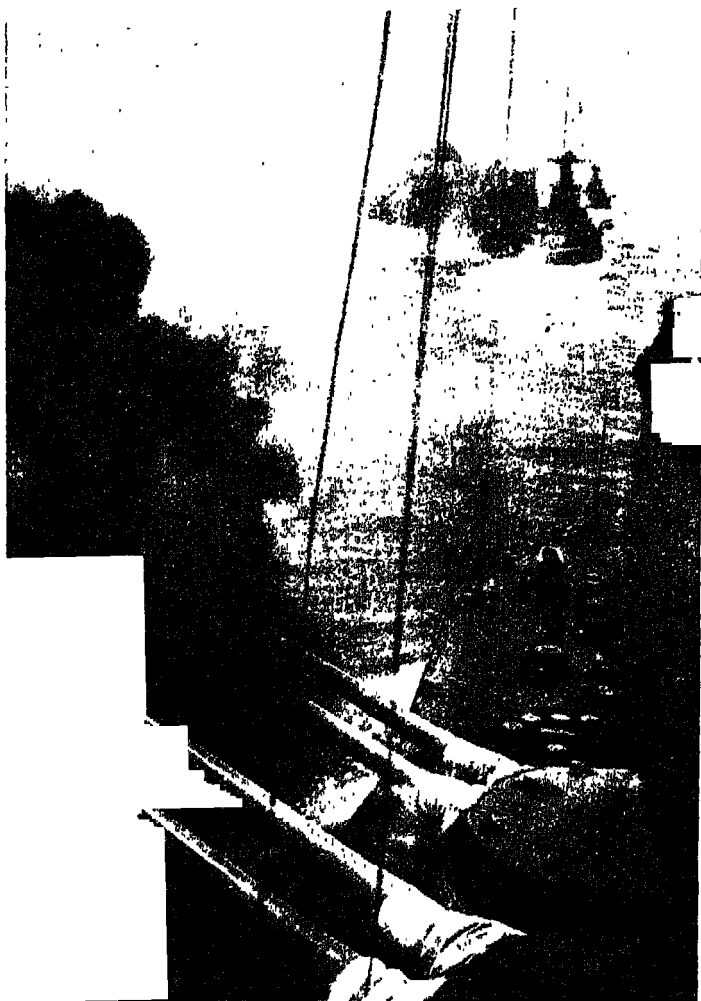
heads were showing above the horizon. Twenty minutes later our own light cruisers were within range, and opened fire. The enemy cruisers returned the fire, but immediately threw out a smoke screen and ran to the north-eastward at high speed. At 12.50 p.m. the two enemy battleships came in sight, one being of the "Littorio" class, and one of the "Cavour" class. These large warships opened fire on our cruisers. Fifteen-inch shells from the *Littorio* and 12.6-inch shells from the *Cavour* battleship were too heavy for our light vessels, and they opened the range by turning away. In a few minutes, however, the two enemy battleships themselves altered course to open the range, and our cruisers turned to pursue the Italian cruisers. It was now a case of general chase. The battle-cruiser *Renown* is an old ship, a veteran of the last war, and her original speed of 31 knots has been reduced by reconstruction, including the provision of more armour and the fitting of bulges along the hull as a protection against torpedoes. As usual, the Italian warships, built for speed, were able to keep out of range of our heavy units, though they were chased to within a few miles of their own coast. The enemy fleet had scattered, and used smoke screens copiously, and although some hits were scored they made good their escape. The action had to be broken off owing to the nearness of enemy aerodrome and minefields. Nevertheless, our gunfire set one enemy cruiser alight, an Italian destroyer was hit and heavily

damaged, and at least one other enemy cruiser was hit by shell fire. It was now the turn of the Fleet Air Arm, flown from H.M.S. *Ark Royal*, which was in company. A squadron of her Swordfish aircraft carried out a daring torpedo attack, and hit the "Littorio" class battleship with one torpedo. Another squadron attacked three of the enemy cruisers, which were 10,000-ton ships of the "Bolzano" class, and scored one hit. The Skuas from the *Ark Royal* carried out a dive-bombing attack, and another enemy cruiser was reported to have been damaged. One of our warships, H.M.S. *Berwick*, under the command of Captain G. L. Warren, R.N., was twice hit by enemy shell fire. Her fighting and steaming capacity were not affected, but one officer and six ratings were killed, two ratings seriously wounded, and seven slightly wounded. We lost two aircraft. At 2.35 p.m. a force of ten enemy bombers, escorted by fighters, appeared on the scene. This was not unexpected, and the fighters of the *Ark Royal* were ready for them. The Italian bombers were intercepted before they could develop their attack, and driven off. At 4.40 p.m. a second and heavier air attack was made by fifteen bombers, approaching in three waves with a large number of fighters overhead. The Fleet Air Arm fighters were ready for them again, and shot two of the Italian machines down. The others pressed home their attack, concentrating on the *Ark Royal*, which replied with all her anti-aircraft guns. Thirty bombs were dropped



ITALIAN CRUISER SAN GIORGIO BURNING IN TOBRUK HARBOUR





BRITISH BATTLESHIPS IN ACTION

all round the aircraft-carrier, but not one hit her, and she suffered no damage.

This long-range action was disappointing in that the Italian Fleet once more refused battle ; and it was the last occasion on which the Navy of our principal enemy in the Mediterranean put to sea in force for four months. Our ships, on the other hand, were very active. Important convoys were passed through the Mediterranean as required ; British submarines took heavy toll of enemy transports and store-ships in the Adriatic, and in the Central Mediterranean between Italy and Tripoli ; and the eastern squadron played a great part in successful military operations which drove the Italians out of Cyrenaica and culminated in the capture of Benghazi, the capital of the province. From time to time our cruiser squadron raided deeply into the Adriatic. On December 18th British battleships passed through the Straits of Otranto, and carried out a heavy bombardment of the Albanian port of Valona. Nearly a hundred tons of high-explosive shells were fired into this important supply port for the Italian armies in conflict with our Greek allies. During all these operations in the Adriatic, on the North African coast, and for the covering of convoys, no attempt was made by the Italian Navy to show fight. Not only did our warships support the Army of the Nile by bombarding the enemy's positions all along the seven hundred miles of coast from Sidi Barrani to Tripoli, but troops and supplies, including

hundreds of tons of water, were carried for the army, and thousands of Italian prisoners were evacuated by sea from the Libyan ports, as we captured them, and taken to Alexandria. So far as naval warfare was concerned, the Mediterranean from end to end was a British lake.

If Italian sea power was in eclipse, the Germans were not idle. Naval help they were not in a position to give. The available large Nazi warships, three or four in number, were busy raiding in the Atlantic. Any German naval reinforcements dispatched to the Mediterranean would have had to reckon with Admiral Somerville's squadron, based on Gibraltar. Herr Hitler, however, had aircraft and to spare. The German dive-bombers had come off badly in the great air actions of the Battle of Britain in the previous autumn. A use was now to be found for them in the Mediterranean. Reports came in of large batches of German airmen, technicians, ground staffs, and so on, passing through Italy en route for Sicily. Gradually, a large number of the Junkers dive-bombers were concentrated at the Sicilian aerodromes.

On 10 January, 1941, the Luftwaffe made its great effort against the Royal Navy. A large convoy had to be passed through the Central Mediterranean with important war material for Greece. Between 7 and 13 January, 1941, the eastern and western squadrons of the Mediterranean Fleet were engaged in covering the voyage of this convoy, and were

successful in passing the whole of this valuable shipping, with its badly needed cargoes, to the Ægean. On January 10th two Italian destroyers were sighted at dawn in the Sicilian Channel. By this time the appearance of any Italian warships at sea was a rarity. Chase was given, and though one of the destroyers managed to escape, the other was sunk. The stricken vessel went down with her guns firing and colours flying, which shows that when well led the Italian sailors will fight gallantly. During this operation, H.M.S. *Gallant*, torpedo-boat-destroyer, was torpedoed, apparently by an Italian submarine. Though badly damaged, she managed to make Malta for repairs.

The Sicilian Channel, between Sicily and the North African coast, forms the narrowest part of the Mediterranean. In the middle of the channel is the small but heavily fortified Italian island of Pantellaria. The convoy of merchant ships was sent through the western passage between Cape Bon and Pantellaria, and the warships covering them stood through the eastern passage between that island and the Sicilian coast. During nearly the whole of the day our warships were subjected to repeated and determined attacks by German dive-bombers and Italian torpedo-carrying aircraft. The torpedo attacks were beaten off without much difficulty, but the dive-bombers pressed home their attacks with desperate courage and high skill. The first group to attack numbered fifteen, and they were obviously

manned by picked pilots. In some cases, when they had released their bombs, they turned their machine-guns on our warships, causing casualties amongst the aircraft guns' crews. Relays of these dive-bombers returned to the attack again and again. They were met each time by a terrific barrage of anti-aircraft fire from our warships, using both their long-range anti-aircraft guns and their multiple pompoms. This latter is a fierce weapon, firing small shells at a very high rate, and known to the sailors as the "Chicago piano." A dive-bomber making its attack develops a speed of four hundred miles an hour, and is not an easy target to hit until it flattens out to release its projectile. Then is the moment to destroy it. Twelve of the dive-bombers were shot down during these attacks, and a number damaged. The aircraft-carrier *Illustrious* (Captain D. W. Boyd, C.B.E., D.S.O., R.N.), was badly hit. She managed to reach Malta, where she was dry-docked and repaired, despite several attempts to complete her destruction by enemy air raids. These failed, and the *Illustrious* in due course sailed from Malta to rejoin the Fleet. H.M.S. *Southampton*, a cruiser of 9,100 tons, completed in 1937, and commanded by Captain B. C. B. Brooke, R.N., was not so fortunate. She was set on fire badly. Though the enemy did not sink her, the flames got out of hand and she had to be abandoned. She was torpedoed by our own forces. The whole of the convoy passed through unscathed, and reached Greece in safety.

The German dive-bombers were operating from the aerodrome at Catania, in Sicily. They had not to wait long for our counter-attack. On the night of 12-13 January we raided Catania in our turn, destroying nine of the German aeroplanes on the ground, and doing much damage to the hangars and petrol stores.

It is easy to be wise after the event ; nevertheless, it would appear that we had underestimated the menace of the German Air Force in Sicily before this action. Otherwise, we might have bombarded Catania aerodrome before this big convoy operation, instead of after it. There was no doubt of our capability to bomb this aerodrome or any other of the Sicilian air stations. They had been attacked previously in the various operations I have described. On the night of 15-16 January a further heavy bombing raid was made on this same aerodrome. The first wave of our aircraft over the target blew up the large hangar on the north-west side of the landing-ground, and set the ruins on fire. This blaze burnt brightly throughout the attack, and was visible over fifty miles away. It acted as a good beacon for the following aircraft. The administration offices and buildings were next set on fire, and a number of aircraft on the ground near the east hangar were set alight. Explosions were also caused among other aircraft dispersed along the south boundary of the aerodrome. From this extremely damaging raid all our aircraft returned without casualties.

The determined attack by the German Air Force on our warships was the most noteworthy example of air action against a fleet at sea that this war has yet produced. From the point of view of the air pilots, conditions were specially favourable. Our warships were in narrow waters, only a short distance away from the enemy aerodromes, and in theory should all have been hit repeatedly and seriously damaged, if not put out of action altogether. This was not an example of a high-level bombing attack. In that form of attack the aircraft drop their bombs in a certain area round the target, for example, a warship, and on the theory of probabilities a certain number of hits must be scored. The air attacks in the Sicilian Channel were mostly carried out at low level, where the greatest possible degree of accuracy could be expected, and the probability of heavier punishment being received by the attacking aircraft accepted.

The lesson from this affair would appear to be that a well-handled fleet, with trained and resolute crews for its anti-aircraft guns, and accompanied by its own fighters, need not be deterred from carrying out vital operations of war by the danger of air attack in waters within comparatively easy flying reach of important concentrations of enemy aircraft. The warships will probably be damaged, but there are risks in all operations of war against a determined enemy. In other words, aircraft are a deterrent to warships seeking to navigate waters where air-

craft can operate in numbers. There is no justification at present, however, for the claim that the Air Arm has driven the warships out of the narrow seas. In the evacuation of the Imperial Forces from Greece in the following April, we only lost two destroyers, and the Nazis then had command of the air.

The next considerable naval operation was the great bombardment of Genoa in the early morning of 12 February, 1941. Reports were coming in that the Germans, who were almost daily obtaining a greater control of all affairs in Italy, were planning an expedition from Genoa with reinforcements for the Italian armies in North Africa. Admiral Somerville, with the Western Mediterranean squadron, was ordered to discourage this expedition. He appeared off the Italian city, fortress, and naval base of Genoa according to plan on the date mentioned. The British force consisted of the battle-cruiser *Renown* (flagship, under the command of Captain R. R. McGrigor, R.N.), the battleship *Malaya* (Captain A. F. E. Palliser, D.S.C., R.N.), the aircraft-carrier *Ark Royal* (Captain C. S. Holland, R.N.), the cruiser *Sheffield* (Captain C. A. A. Larcom, R.N.), and a flotilla of destroyers. Three hundred tons of naval shells were fired. One of the main targets was the important Ansaldo shipbuilding yards, which were set on fire, the electric power station and boiler house being put out of action. The main electric power station of the port of Genoa was hit and set on fire, and the dry docks,



warehouses, and harbour works surrounding the inner port heavily damaged and left burning. The fuel-oil station and its oil tanks were knocked to pieces, the main goods yard of the Genoa railway station was hit, and a number of supply ships were sunk or damaged.

The aircraft from the *Ark Royal* had three duties during this operation. They spotted for the warships and corrected their fire ; they bombed certain selected targets in the port ; and they guarded the bombarding squadron from counter-action by Italian aircraft to such effect that two Italian aeroplanes which took the air were promptly shot down. We lost one bomber. Bombs from the air and incendiaries were dropped on the oil refinery at Leghorn, one of the most important oil plants in Italy. Others of our naval aircraft attacked Pisa, hitting the aerodrome and railway junction. Though Genoa and the nearby coast is defended by heavy shore batteries none of our warships was hit, and no damage of any kind was suffered, except for the loss of the one bomber.

Though this was not the first large-scale bombardment of a great fortress from the sea carried out during the present war, another example being the similar attacks on Brest, it was the most important, as it was a daylight attack on a first-class fortress by warships.

In the old sailing-ship days, bombardments of shore positions were frequent. It was then dis-

covered, during the Napoleonic wars, that properly sited and well-protected shore batteries were dangerous targets for warships to attack. Almost any part of the hull of a warship outside the comparatively small armoured surfaces is vulnerable to shell fire, while a shore battery can take a great deal of punishment ; and unless the guns themselves are actually hit, little damage need be done. It became a truism amongst students of naval tactics that the bombardment of strong fortresses from the sea was too risky. Now that the range of naval guns has increased so enormously, it is possible for the bombarding warships to remain below the horizon and to fire effectively at ranges up to twenty miles. If the position of the objectives on shore is known accurately, the warships, having fixed their own positions on the charts, can make fairly accurate shooting without seeing the targets at all. If, in addition, the warships enjoy the assistance of local air superiority, their reconnaissance aircraft can observe the results of the fire, and signal the range corrections needed, while such aid from spotting aircraft is denied to the shore batteries. A generation ago, when naval guns were not expected to fire at such long ranges, the attacking warships had to come within full view of the shore, and thus expose themselves to the counter-attack of the artillerymen on land. The shell fire from a modern battleship can be more accurate, and is certainly much more damaging than the bombs in even the heaviest air

raid. I write here of ordinary bombs. The special explosives used in certain British bombs which made their first appearance in this war during the spring of 1941 may be more damaging than 15- or 16-inch naval shells.

The southernmost island of the Dodecanese group is Casteloritzo. It had been fortified by the Italians and has, or had, a seaplane base and aerodrome. Enemy aircraft operating from this island had become a nuisance, and it was decided to attack the place. A force of our destroyers, carrying troops and supported by aircraft, were detailed for the operation, which began on 25 February, 1941. After a bombardment and some lively air fighting with both German and Italian planes, a landing was made and the whole island occupied. The seaplane base and all other military objectives were destroyed, and our forces, having accomplished their task, withdrew.

March 1941 was a fateful month for all the combatants. On the first day of the month Bulgaria signed the Axis Pact. On the next day German troops of all arms and great columns of tanks and other war vehicles began to pour into Bulgaria. They had been preceded by swarms of Nazis in plain clothes, including large parties of engineers and other technicians who had been working for some months improving and enlarging the Bulgarian aerodromes. German intentions were now clear. The Reichswehr was going to the rescue of the dis-

confronted Italian armies worsted in the aggression against Greece. In a last effort to save his personal reputation Mussolini visited the Albanian front and gave orders for a great counter-attack against the Greek positions, the operations, on a very large scale, lasting for several days. In the heaviest fighting, which raged for four days, three Italian divisions were practically destroyed.

This was by no means the end of Italy's troubles in the month of March. Our submarines operating in the Mediterranean were particularly successful. Thus, H.M. Submarine *Parthian* (Commander M. C. Rimington, D.S.O., R.N.) made a highly successful attack on a convoy of merchant ships escorted by Italian men-of-war south of Italy. A large tanker of about 10,000 tons and a troopship of 6,000 tons were torpedoed. H.M.S. *Utmost* (Lieutenant-Commander R. D. Cayley, R.N.) intercepted a convoy of Italian troop transports crowded with soldiers. Despite an escort of warships, two of the transports were torpedoed. H.M.S. *Unique* (Lieutenant A. F. Collett, R.N.) torpedoed a large supply ship also in an escorted convoy, and H.M.S. *Triumph* (Lieutenant-Commander W. J. W. Woods, R.N.) sank two Italian supply ships on their way to North Africa.

The greatest blow against Italian naval power was the battle in the Ionian Sea, now known officially as the Battle of Cape Matapan. It saw the eclipse of Italian sea power in the Mediterranean. This extraordinary action is without precedent in the long

annals of naval warfare. Heavy losses were inflicted on an enemy fleet, the opposing warships suffering no damage or casualties whatsoever. In writing of losses I refer to the warships and their crews who engaged heavily gunned Italian vessels bristling with torpedo tubes at close range. In the air operations we suffered losses ; though these were remarkably light, only two of our aircraft being destroyed. Two Italian and one German aircraft were shot down. The action was noteworthy in another respect, in that, for the first time, a fleet attempting to avoid action was hampered and delayed by aircraft with the result that it was brought to battle by the slower pursuing force. This battle has been compared to the Battle of Jutland in the last war, or even to the Battle of Trafalgar. It was on a level with neither action. This in no way detracts from the gallantry and skill of the commander-in-chief, his captains, and his seamen. At the Battle of Jutland the German commander-in-chief was prepared to fight, and did fight, until, finding himself in a disadvantageous tactical position and faced by the main body of the British Fleet, he made his withdrawal without dishonour. At Trafalgar the French and Spanish admirals fought the matter out in pitched battle. At Cape Matapan the Italian commander-in-chief, Admiral Riccardi, thought only of escape.

Much nonsense has been written about this battle being a decoy action. The erroneous idea spread abroad was that the Italian Fleet was distracting our

naval forces, putting them off the scent, so to speak, while large German and Italian land armies were being transported to Tripolitania. There is no evidence whatsoever of any such plan on the part of the Italians, and there is probably not a word of truth in the other legend which has grown up, namely, that the Germans forced their Italian allies to sea in order to cover their own landing in North Africa. When the two Italian squadrons were reported at sea by our reconnaissance aircraft on their routine flights, the main body of the British Fleet was in harbour at Alexandria, the ships lying at short notice, that is, with steam ready and able to put to sea without delay. The most probable reason for the disastrous cruise of the Italian Navy is that they were hoping to intercept some of our convoys with troops and munitions sailing from Egypt for Greece. Alexandria was at this time the normal station of our eastern squadron. It is some 1,000 miles from Tripoli.

I have explained why this squadron was at the Egyptian port instead of at Malta. Practically the only interference we attempted with the traffic between North Africa and Italy at this time, except for an occasional sweep by one or other of the sections of the Mediterranean Fleet based at Alexandria or Gibraltar, was the guerilla warfare of our submarines and air attacks on convoys and ports in Italy and North Africa. The traffic between the Italian and Sicilian ports and Tripolitania went

on intermittently for many weeks. The sea passage is comparatively short, and the long nights of the winter season in the Mediterranean provided a means for slipping the convoys across. Though the enemy may have made some use of French territorial waters, we would not have hesitated to attack on this account. It is more likely that the bulk of the traffic went direct. A large-scale use of the waters close to the French Tunisian coast would have lengthened the voyage and yet given no immunity from our counter-action. Nor could the Vichy Government have had just grounds for complaint if we had assailed troopships or warships abusing the three-mile limit.<sup>1</sup>

The idea put abroad that a vast armada of Italian troopships carrying German mechanized forces and soldiers was lying ready to sweep across the Sicilian Channel while the unhappy Italians were fleeing before Admiral Cunningham's warships is absurd. The unhappy truth is that we were not informed of the German intentions and underestimated their enterprise in sending such large forces to North Africa. We supposed that they would not dare, under the circumstances, to take such risks. This was a miscalculation; but the main fault lay with the British Intelligence Service, which appeared, on this as on other occasions, to be incapable of doing its job—which is the gathering of accurate news of enemy movements and intentions.

<sup>1</sup> It is probable that some of the Italian troop and supply ships made first for Bizerta under cover of darkness and from there sailed, again at night, from Tripoli.

To return to the events of March 27th, 28th, and 29th, practically the whole of the surviving Italian Fleet was now at sea, which was sound strategy in case they were forced to action. Indeed, on paper, the Italian admiral was in superior force to Admiral Cunningham's eastern squadron of the Mediterranean Fleet. When the first body of the Italian warships was sighted at about midday on 27 March, 1941, our aircraft, Sunderland four-engined flying-boats, reported them as being to the south-eastward of Sicily and heading eastward. It was established by later reconnaissance that the main Italian force consisted of the *Vittorio Veneto*, one of the large and new "Littorio" class battleships, and two of the reconstructed "Cavour's." This was the whole of the battle line remaining fit for sea after the operations at Taranto and off Sardinia already described. The three battleships were accompanied by eleven cruisers and fourteen destroyers. Four of the Italian cruisers present were of the 10,000-ton type with 8-inch guns. Admiral Cunningham had with his flag three battleships, one aircraft-carrier, four cruisers, and a flotilla of destroyers. Our cruisers were all of the smaller type, mounting 6-inch guns only. The British line of battle was as follows :

Flagship : H.M.S. *Warspite*, battleship (Flag-Captain D. B. Fisher, C.B.E., R.N.) ; H.M.S. *Valiant*, battleship (Captain C. G. Morgan, D.S.O., R.N.) ; H.M.S. *Barham*, battleship (Captain G. C. Cooke, R.N.).



The remainder of Admiral Cunningham's command was composed as follows :

H.M.S. *Formidable*, aircraft-carrier (Captain A. W. L. T. Bissett, R.N.).

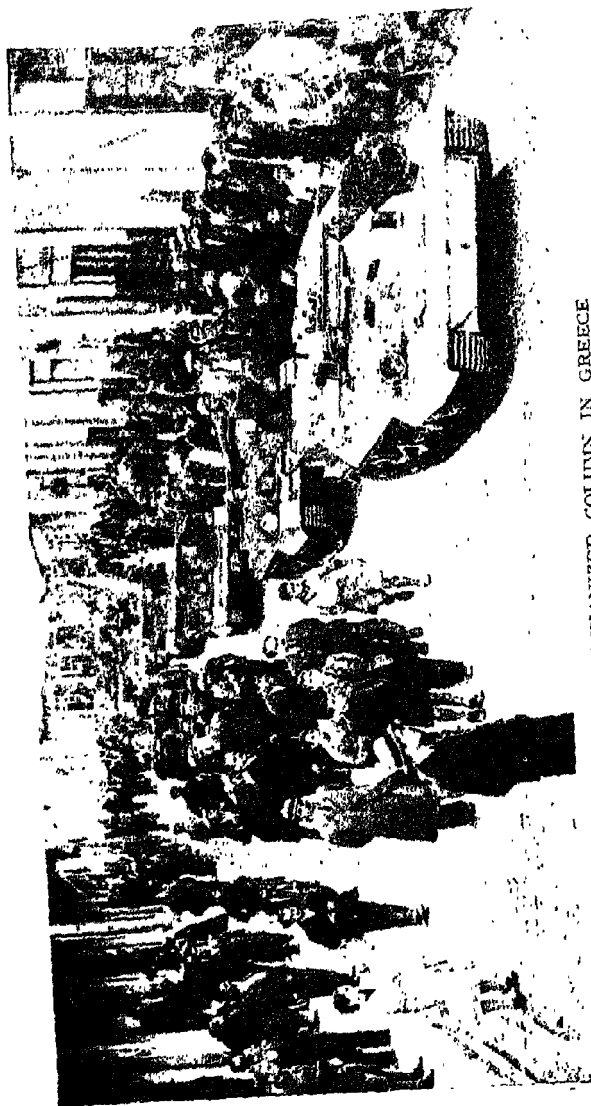
Cruisers : H.M.S. *Orion*, flying the flag of Vice-Admiral Pridham-Whipple, C.B., C.V.O., R.N. (Captain G. R. B. Back, R.N.) ; H.M.S. *Ajax* (Captain E. D. B. McCarthy, R.N.) ; H.M.A.S. *Perth* (Captain Sir P. W. Bowyer-Smith, Bart., R.N.) ; H.M.S. *Gloucester* (Captain H. A. Rowley, R.N.).

A flotilla of destroyers.

In addition to these naval forces, there presently came into action certain bomber squadrons of the Royal Air Force which had been originally detailed to carry out an air raid on Tripoli, for which they were just taking the air. These Blenheim bombers were ordered to rendezvous with the Fleet at sea and change their targets to Italian warships. Their part in the action will be described presently. A flotilla of Greek destroyers was ordered to join the British admiral's flag as soon as the Greek Admiralty was informed of what was afoot. They sailed from their own ports immediately, but were not in time to join in the fight. The Greek warships arrived on the scene the next morning and helped to rescue Italian survivors. Presuming that the enemy had been in search of British convoys, the four cruisers and the destroyers were ordered to make for the



THIRTY-NINE TROOPS OF THE 501ST PARACHUTE BATTALION U.S. ARMY LANDING FROM  
THREE PLANES



BRITISH MECHANIZED COLUMN IN GREECE

island of Crete. These dispositions proved to be the right ones, for on the following morning at 7.49, 28 March, 1941, our air scouts reported the *Vittorio Veneto* with six cruisers and seven destroyers 35 miles south of Gavdo Island. This is a small island off the south coast of Crete. The enemy were then steering to the south-eastwards and our aeroplanes presently sighted two more cruisers and two or three more destroyers joining the main Italian force. By this time our cruisers were forty miles to the south-eastward of the enemy.

The main British Fleet had left the harbour of Alexandria on the afternoon of the 27th, and were now 95 miles south-east of the cruiser force and steaming north-west. As soon as the aircraft reports were received, our cruiser force altered course to the northward and sighted the first enemy cruisers at two minutes past eight. Vice-Admiral Pridham-Whipple then turned to the south-eastward, hoping to draw the enemy towards our three battleships. For one hour the Italian admiral fell in with this manœuvre. He was in greatly superior force, his battleship was as fast as any of our cruisers and his own cruisers a good deal faster. At 9 o'clock in the morning, however, he changed his mind and his course. The Italian Fleet turned about and made off to the northwards. Our cruisers turned about immediately and gave chase. At 10.58 in the forenoon the Italian battleship was sighted by the *Orion*, sixteen miles away. The Italian opened fire, drop-

ping a number of 15-inch shells near the *Orion*. The range was too great for the 6-inch guns of the *Orion* to reply. The vice-admiral commanding our cruisers accordingly turned again to the south-eastwards, partly to keep out of the range of the heavy guns of the enemy battleship, and partly in the hope of drawing the Italians towards the British battle line. For half an hour the Italian admiral gave chase. He was then attacked by torpedo-carrying aircraft launched from H.M.S. *Formidable* and appeared to have received at least one hit. This was too much for the Italians, and the whole of this part of their Fleet altered course again to the north-westward and for home.

At 11.35 a.m. our reconnaissance aircraft reported a second Italian squadron consisting of two of the "Cavour" class battleships, and three cruisers and four destroyers 89 miles west of Gavdo Island. These ships were soon making for home also. At the same time another torpedo attack by naval aircraft was made on the *Vittorio Veneto* and she is believed to have been hit a second time. In a third attack more hits with torpedoes were claimed. It was now the turn of our Blenheim bombers of the Middle Eastern Command of the Royal Air Force, who had made their rendezvous and proceeded to deliver a number of bombing attacks between 3 and 5 in the afternoon. A great number of bombs were dropped and it is claimed that one cruiser was hit twice, another cruiser was probably hit, and a direct hit

was made on an Italian destroyer. By 4 o'clock our scouting aircraft reported that the *Vittorio Veneto* had reduced speed. At dusk two further torpedo attacks were made by aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm, and though it is not claimed that the large battleship was hit, it is known that one of the enemy cruisers was torpedoed. During these numerous air attacks by the Royal Air Force and the Fleet Air Arm, the Italian warships zigzagged. There was a good deal of confusion and the Italian warships appeared to be getting in each other's way. They also laid smoke screens. Though the Italian men-of-war, with the exception of the *Vittorio Veneto*, had not reduced speed, the effect of the zigzagging was the same, for our pursuing warships were steering a straight course, and just before dark our cruisers again sighted the enemy. The last seen of the *Vittorio Veneto* was just before darkness fell. According to the reports of our scouting aircraft, she was then only making about 8 knots speed. Her quarter-deck was awash and eleven destroyers and five cruisers were spread around to protect her. Whether this great warship reached port or sank is unknown. She was certainly in sorry plight.

It was now the turn of the British destroyers. They were ordered to seek for the Italian warships in the dark and torpedo them. The battleship was to be the main target. Half the flotilla was used for this attack, the other half remaining with our heavy warships to screen them from any counter-attack

which the Italian destroyers might attempt in the darkness.

At 10.10 p.m. an enemy vessel was sighted, apparently lying damaged and stopped, three miles to the southward of the flagship's course. It is now known that this was the 10,000-ton Italian cruiser *Pola*, already damaged by air attack. She was being covered or assisted by three other Italian cruisers and these crossed the bows of our battle fleet from starboard to port. They did not appear to be expecting action and had certainly not seen our warships, for their gun turrets were trained fore and aft. They passed close in the darkness to the British destroyer *Greyhound* (Commander W. A. Marshall A'Deane, D.S.C., R.N.). The destroyer switched on her searchlights and illuminated the leading enemy cruiser. She formed a perfect target for our three battleships steaming in line ahead, only 4,000 yards away. Our big ships opened fire immediately with the 15-inch guns of their main armaments. The first salvos struck home and practically destroyed the two leading Italian cruisers. Enemy destroyers were then sighted astern of the Italian cruisers and they turned and fired their torpedoes. Our battleships immediately turned away to avoid the torpedo attack and the Italian destroyers were engaged by the Australian destroyer *Stuart* (Captain H. M. L. Waller, D.S.O., R.A.N.) and the destroyer *Havoc* (Lieutenant G. R. G. Watkins, R.N.). A hot action followed, the Italian destroyers being repeatedly hit

by gunfire from our own destroyers. This was a close-range fight, and the amazing thing is that not even in this destroyer action were our ships hit. In a night action at very high speed it is not easy to keep contact. The Italian destroyers were able to dodge away in the darkness and under cover of their own smoke screens. The other British half flotilla, it will be remembered, had been detached to search for the *Vittorio Veneto* in the darkness and torpedo her. They failed to find their target, but seeing the searchlights and gunfire of the other action closed in and sank by torpedo two Italian cruisers each of 10,000 tons, the *Zara* and *Pola*, which had already been badly damaged, and indeed wrecked, by the gunfire of the battleships. It was during this night of slaughter that one of our destroyers, the *Havoc*, which had fired all its torpedoes, was actually alongside the damaged cruiser *Pola*. Her captain sent the following message to Admiral Cunningham: "I am hanging on to the stern of the *Pola*. Shall we board her or blow her stern off with depth charges? We have no torpedoes left." The answer was to send another British destroyer with a torpedo to finish off the Italian cruiser.

The gunnery of the three British battleships in this sudden action was superb. When the *Fiume*, leading the Italian heavy cruisers, was sighted the *Warspite* and her consort next astern opened fire immediately, each firing a salvo of four 15-inch shells. Both salvos hit, and at least seven out of



the eight shells got home. The surrounding sea was lit up by a great burst of red flame extending from the foremost funnel to the after gun turret. The whole ship appeared to have exploded. The after gun turret was blown over the side. A few seconds later, the next salvo from the other four 15-inch guns of the *Warspite* was fired. This bouquet of shells hit also, and that was the end of the *Fiume*, so far as any fighting was concerned. The flagship then shifted target to the next Italian, the heavy cruiser *Zara*, and the first salvo hit also. The *Zara* burst into flames. All our ships switched on their searchlights when action was joined, and the whole area was lit up by gun flashes, searchlights and the burning hulks of the stricken Italian cruisers. To avoid torpedoes the big battleships had withdrawn from this mêlée.

When it was over, the surviving Italian warships escaping under cover of darkness and smoke screens, the damage was: three 10,000-ton cruisers, the *Zara*, *Pola* and *Fiume*, the light cruiser *Giovanni della Baude Nere* and the destroyers *Vincenzo Gioberti*, *Maestrale* and *Alfieri* sunk; one other cruiser known to have been badly damaged and possibly sunk. The *Vittorio Veneto* was some distance away and with her screening cruisers and destroyers was not located. A very heavy explosion was heard, and this may have been the end of her. In any case, this section of the Italian Fleet fought an independent action. Heavy gunfire was heard and gun flashes

seen from a quarter where there were none of our warships. The fleeing survivors from the group already in action with our ships appeared to have blundered into the other portion of their Fleet, who opened fire on them in error. We shall probably have to wait until after hostilities cease before the full facts are disclosed, as in so many of the episodes of the war of 1914-18. As an example, we lost the battleship *Audacious* in a minefield early in the last war. Though photographs of the sinking warship taken by United States travellers appeared in the American newspapers, our Admiralty refused to admit the loss. We knew afterwards that the German Naval Staff was uncertain about the sinking of the *Audacious* until after the war. In this war the British Admiralty has been extraordinarily frank in admitting warship losses. This has the advantage of reassuring the British public, which can accept bad news so long as it feels it is being told the truth. It is a pity the other Departments of State, and particularly the War Office, have been inclined to withhold information which is well known to the enemy. In sea warfare there is more room for doubt, and there are sometimes military disadvantages in being too frank about naval losses. We can hardly blame the Italian Naval Staff for trying to keep us guessing about the fate of the *Vittorio Veneto*. The Italian official account of this battle was as follows :

For some time past the growing intensification of the enemy traffic between Egyptian and Greek ports has been

remarked. Against this traffic our destroyers and aircraft had often taken action, inflicting losses which were announced in bulletins. Nevertheless, it was necessary to attempt a bigger offensive action in order to force the enemy to adopt stronger methods of protection so as to avoid losses. The offensive began on the night of March 25-26 with a brilliant action by shock units which penetrated into Suda Bay. The next night, after an extensive air reconnaissance, eight Italian cruisers, escorted by destroyers, left their bases supported by a battleship.

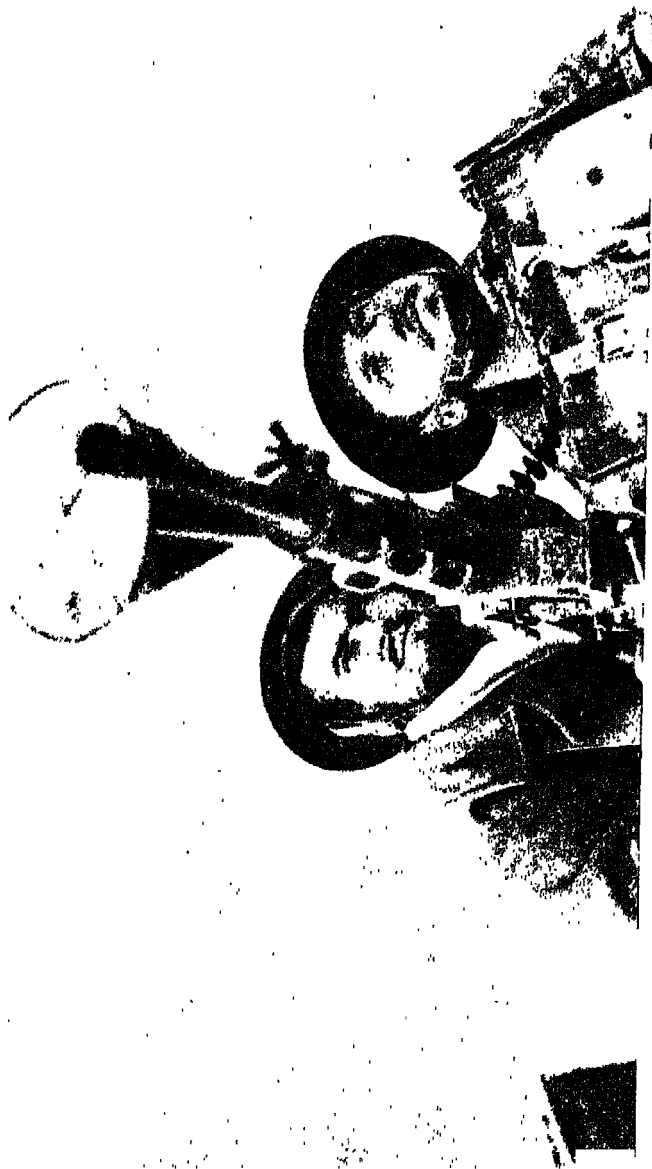
On the morning of March 28 this force reached a position south of Crete, and opened fire on a detachment of enemy cruisers, which at once evaded contact. While our ships were returning, sweeping the sea, our aircraft made torpedo attacks and succeeded in hitting two cruisers and an aircraft-carrier, as well as several merchant ships. In the afternoon of March 28 the enemy aircraft also made torpedo attacks, and towards evening hit a cruiser, which was obliged to slow down by the damage received.

A detachment, which included one cruiser, while acting as a screen some distance from the main body, encountered in the night enemy forces which included, according to British statements, several battleships. A violent battle ensued. Our ships at once opened fire and made a destroyer attack which, according to enemy accounts, was pressed home to short range from the enemy ships. Many torpedoes were fired.

Our losses, including the cruiser already hit by a torpedo, were those announced in the G.H.Q. bulletin (i.e., three cruisers and two destroyers : Italian *communiqué* of March 30th). Next day squadrons of our Air Force on offensive reconnaissance hit another cruiser with torpedoes and an aircraft-carrier with bombs.



PARACHUTIST JUMPING



SOLDIERS OF FREE FRANCE AT BARDIA



PORT OF TOBRUK



ITALIAN LIGHT TANKS AT BENGHAZI



ITALIAN PRISONERS AT BARDIA

The only comment required with regard to this communiqué is that the damage stated to have been inflicted by air attack on our warships was imaginary. An unofficial report by the commander of the Italian destroyer *Alfieri* is more truthful. This officer was rescued from the sea by the Greek destroyer *Hydra*. It is of interest to note that the *Hydra* was built by the Italians at Genoa for the Greek Navy. This officer's account of his own experiences was given in these words :

Our vessel was last in line of the flotilla. The British attack was very sudden and the *Alfieri* was badly hit at the outset. One broadside put our rudder out of action and destroyed the whole of the stern and guns. The *Alfieri*, rudderless and out of control, began to describe circles. The deck was covered with the bodies of officers and men. Survivors of this terrific onslaught tried to save themselves by taking to the ship's boats, but most of these were destroyed by British fire. The ship preceding us was in flames and the blinding glare of the fire prevented our seeing the enemy.

The *Alfieri* took a dangerous list to starboard and its plight became tragic. The commander had just ordered us to save ourselves when another broadside destroyed the bridge and killed the captain. The ship sank stern first and the crew threw themselves into the sea. I jumped into the water, and the *Alfieri* disappeared soon after.

I was picked up in a small boat with 30 others, but it was not until noon the next day that I was rescued by the *Hydra*. Of the others in the boat only eight survived ; two became insane. I wondered how it was possible for



a naval action lasting only half an hour to cause such destruction. I was infuriated to see our aircraft bombing British ships which were trying to collect survivors.

Why did the Italian warships fail to inflict any damage on their opponents? The *Fiume* and *Zara* were surprised, it is true, and when our battleships were able to hit them first their situation was hopeless. Yet they had strong torpedo armaments and the conditions were good for using them. The *Pola*, *Fiume*, and *Zara* each carry eight torpedo tubes. The *Pola*, though damaged by air attack before our warships encountered her, was not in action at the beginning and should have been able to use her torpedoes. The 6-inch gun cruiser sunk, the *Giovanni della Baude Nere*, carries four torpedo tubes and had a reputed speed of 37 knots. She was not fired at by the battleships and should have been able to make a torpedo attack. The Italian destroyers present did fire their torpedoes and this caused our battleships to turn away. But why were they stationed *astern* of their own cruisers instead of ahead? And why did they not press home their attack? The destroyers *Maestrale* and *Vincenzo Gioberti*, both sunk in the *melée*, were large modern vessels of 1,729 tons mounting six torpedo tubes each. They would not fire more than three torpedoes each at the moment of the first contact, and would have three more tubes ready loaded. And what of the other twelve Italian destroyers in the vicinity? The *Warspite* and her two heavy consorts

had disclosed their position. The whole area was illuminated by gun-flashes, searchlights, and burning Italian warships. There was an opportunity for which British destroyer captains long. At night a well-handled destroyer has her great opportunity. Apart from this one torpedo attack, no attempt at revenge was made by any of the Italian captains. They fired a few shells, then threw out smoke screens and appeared to think only of escape. Once more we see the old lesson reinforced : a fleet which tries always to avoid action with its opponents falls into the habit of flight. The German sailors were brave enough in the early years of the last war ; yet the habit of avoiding action undermined their morale in the end. When German power was tottering in October 1918, orders were issued for the High Sea Fleet to put to sea and, at last, fight our Grand Fleet *à l'outrance*. It was too late. The German crews mutinied. In this war the German commanders have been instructed to avoid action with British warships unless they themselves are in overwhelming strength. Their sea raiders, vide the *Graf Spee*, set out with the intention of attacking lightly armed merchantmen and escaping from action with their peers. When battle cannot be avoided and hitting begins, the young Nazis, drunk and drugged with fanaticism and propaganda, go to pieces. Navies built primarily for speed and employed chiefly for evasion are in danger of spiritual defeat before ever the shooting begins.

In this war no British man-of-war has surrendered. When faced with a hopeless fight, each British warship has gone down with colours flying and her guns in action. The officers and seamen of the British Merchant Navy have shown the same gallantry and spirit. This tradition is more important and valuable than guns, armour plate, or torpedoes.

On the morning after the battle, our Sunderland flying-boats surveying the scene and searching for more victims, sighted great numbers of Italian survivors in boats and on rafts spread over a large area. British and Greek warships speeded to the rescue and picked up 68 officers and 849 ratings, including a number of Germans. The presence of the Germans is capable of two explanations. They may have been seeking experience, or they may have been embarked to stiffen the morale of their Italian brothers in arms. They certainly had the experience. We could have picked up 200 or 300 more survivors but for the attentions of the German Air Force. German dive-bombers appeared on the scene and made repeated attacks on the warships engaged on this mission of mercy. One of the Junkers 88 was shot down in the process. It would have been rash to expose our warships and the Greek destroyers to such air attack. The ships had to stop to rescue the shipwrecked seamen and in some cases to lower their boats. The target thus presented was apparently too tempting for the gallant Nazi pilots.

Admiral Cunningham had no other course open to him than to countermand his orders to rescue the remaining survivors. He, however, made a signal *en clair* to the Italian commander-in-chief giving the position of the rafts and boats not yet picked up and suggesting that a fast hospital ship be sent to rescue them. The following reply was received : "Thank you for your communication. Hospital ship *Gradisca* already left Taranto yesterday evening at 17.00." Among the officers rescued was Captain Despini, commanding the *Pola*. Admiral Cantoni, commanding the heavy cruiser squadron and flying his flag in the *Zara*, was killed.

Admiral Cunningham sent the following signal to his Fleet :

The action was a notable success over the enemy. The skilful handling of our cruisers and the untiring efforts of the Fleet Air Arm kept me well informed of the enemy's movements. The well-pressed-home attacks by the torpedo-bombing aircraft on the *Littorio* so reduced the speed of the enemy fleet that we were able to gain contact during the night and inflict heavy damage. The devastating results of our battleships' gunfire are ample reward for months of patient training. This work was completed by the destroyers in the admirable way we have come to expect of them. The contribution of the engine-room departments in this success cannot be over-emphasized. Their work, not only in keeping their ships steaming at high speed for long periods but in the work of maintenance under most difficult conditions has been most praiseworthy. I am grateful to all in the Fleet for their support on this and other occasions. Well done !

It will be noted that the commander-in-chief refers to the *Littorio*. This signal was made before the prisoners had been interrogated. The evidence of the captured Italians agreed that their flagship was the *Vittorio Veneto*, and not the *Littorio*, and I have therefore presumed that the *Vittorio Veneto* was the Italian battleship present.

The strategical results of this battle were important. Italian naval pretensions were at an end. The effective Fascist line of battle was reduced to two old and slow capital ships. This would have enabled us, in case of need, to detach naval reinforcements to the Pacific or westward into the Atlantic. We were able to send our expeditionary force to Greece and to keep it supplied without fear of Italian opposition. When this expeditionary force had to be evacuated again we could scatter our naval units to assist in this intricate operation without apprehension of attack by raiding Italian warships. Our naval predominance in the Eastern Mediterranean after the Battle of Cape Matapan should have enabled us to prevent the occupation of the Greek islands off the Turkish coast by the Nazis. That we allowed these sea-borne invasions was not because of lack of naval strength to prevent them. Our Fleet was also able to carry out heavy bombardments of Tripoli and other Italian possessions on the Libyan coast and to assist our military operations on land during the German-Italian attempt to invade Egypt, with little fear of diversions by the Italian Navy.

Admiral Cunningham's victories were thoroughly deserved. He had brought his warships' crews to a high state of training and efficiency. After the collapse of France he had a difficult task. His line of battle consisted of three old warships and might have been opposed by an Italian line of battle of six, including two of the latest and most powerful type of super-dreadnoughts. In cruisers and destroyers the inferiority both in numbers and gun power was even more marked. The Italians had a great flotilla of submarines, they had specialized in small fast motor-torpedo-boats, and they had a great Air Force. Neither at Alexandria nor Haifa, the two best bases available for Admiral Cunningham, are there adequate docking and repair facilities for a large fleet. The Italians had a very large Air Force, and though the Royal Navy in the Eastern Mediterranean received full co-operation and support from the Middle Eastern Command of the Royal Air Force under Air Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, the latter had to provide aircraft for campaigns in East Africa carried out over vast areas, for the defence of Egypt and the conquest of Libya, and for the support of Greece. The nation was fortunate, therefore, in having as the naval commander-in-chief in this important theatre of war an officer of outstanding ability and great experience.

Admiral Sir Andrew Browne Cunningham, K.C.B., D.S.O., is one of the new school of naval officers who received the most important part of

their training in small ships. At the beginning of this century technical improvements in the torpedo led to the building of great numbers of torpedo-boats, torpedo-boat-destroyers and submarines. These comparatively small craft were, and are, commanded by young and junior officers who thus had responsibilities and opportunities thrust upon them at an early age. At the most formative period of their naval careers they were able to exercise initiative and independence of judgment. This modern generation of senior officers includes in its ranks many fine leaders of men.

Admiral Cunningham joined the Royal Navy in 1897, serving as a cadet in the old training ship *Britannia*. In 1900 he was a midshipman in the cruiser *Doris*, flagship on the Cape of Good Hope station during the South African War, and was landed for service with the naval brigade. In 1903 he was promoted sub-lieutenant and appointed second-in-command of the destroyer *Orwell*. Most of his earlier career was in destroyers. In 1911 he was appointed to command the destroyer *Scorpion* and was still in command of this ship in August 1914. In 1915 the *Scorpion* did nine months' strenuous service in the Gallipoli campaign. In 1918 Cunningham was promoted commander and appointed to command destroyers in the Dover Patrol. He assisted in the famous attack on Zeebrugge. In 1919 he was on active service in the Baltic. Decorated for services at Dover with the



SOLLUM FROM THE AIR



BENGHAZI—THE PORT SHOWING THE CATHEDRAL





ITALIAN WHIPPET TANKS



SOLLUM

Distinguished Service Order, he received two bars to this Order for services in the Baltic. Cunningham was then appointed to the sub-committee of the Naval Inter-Allied Commission of Control, responsible for the demilitarization of Heligoland and the dismantling of the German fortifications on that island. In 1926 Cunningham commanded destroyer flotillas and then served for two years as Flag-Captain on the West Indies and North American stations. After a year's course in 1929 at the Imperial Defence College he was appointed to command the battleship *Rodney*. After two years in command he was made Commodore Royal Naval Barracks at Chatham and while there was promoted Rear-Admiral. From 1934 to 1936 Rear-Admiral Cunningham commanded the destroyers in the Mediterranean, and from 1937 to 1938 he was Vice-Admiral commanding the battle-cruiser squadron and second-in-command on the Mediterranean station. It will be seen that he has had plenty of experience and knowledge of the Middle Sea. In November 1938 Admiral Cunningham was made deputy chief of the Naval Staff at the Admiralty and in January 1939 was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE CONQUEST OF CYRENAICA

THE LAURELS OF THE VICTORIOUS LIBYAN campaign of the winter of 1940-41 may have faded and withered ; yet it will be accounted in history as one of the most remarkable land campaigns ever undertaken. The Army of the Nile, vastly inferior in numbers to Marshal Graziani's army, deployed for the invasion of Egypt, counter-attacked on 16 December, 1940, and scored an overwhelming victory from which the enemy never recovered. Strongly fortified camps and heavily defended positions of great strength were overwhelmed and the whole province of Cyrenaica overrun. On 3 January, 1941, Bardia was taken after a siege, on January 22nd the Italian naval port and fortress at Tobruk was taken, and on February 8 Benghazi, the capital of the province, fell. On February 9th our advance forces reached Al Agheila, 175 miles by road from Benghazi and on the edge of the great Sirte Desert between the provinces of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. This marked the end of our western advance. On March 20th the southern oasis of Jarabub, which had been contained by a small Australian force, was taken, with 800 of the garrison, and our victories appeared to be complete.

These extraordinarily rapid conquests of a vast territory, during which 150,000 Italian soldiers, sailors, and airmen were taken prisoner and immense quantities of tanks, guns, aeroplanes, stores, and booty of all kinds captured, were made by forces greatly inferior in numbers to the Italians. The actual troops engaged in the fighting on our side were never more than 30,000 in number.

On 26 March, 1941, El Agheila was recaptured by a mechanized and armoured German force. On April 4th we abandoned Benghazi, and on the 14th the first German-Italian attack was made at Tobruk, into which our forces, amounting to a division, had fallen back.

This, then, is the narrative, in broad outline, of these extraordinary events. Viewing them as a whole, the result was as follows :

In September 1940 a great Italian army was marshalled on Egyptian territory ready for the great invasion, with Alexandria, Cairo, and the Suez Canal as objectives. In April 1941 this army and all its equipment had ceased to exist, the German High Command had had to send considerable forces of all arms to North Africa, and, together with Italian reinforcements, were in the same geographical position under General Rommel as was the purely Italian army of Marshal Graziani the previous September. At the cost of comparatively trivial losses General Wavell had gained seven months of precious time and forced the Germans to divert at

least three Panzer divisions from other theatres of war along precarious lines of communication. Despite some blunders, the Army of the Nile performed great services for the Allied cause. The historian of the future will see the laurels as green and fresh as ever.

I have described in a previous chapter the strategical plan of the British and French General Staffs in the Middle East. It hinged on the great army mustered under the supreme command of General Weygand. When France collapsed and Italy intervened, General Wavell found himself in a position of great strategical weakness. No one could foretell what would happen in Syria. It was necessary, therefore, to maintain a covering force in Palestine. It was known that during her nine months of non-belligerency, Italy had accumulated large forces in North Africa with an abundance of supplies of petrol, ammunition, and military stores of all kinds. For twenty years the training ground for a substantial Italian army, the provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were now occupied by a force which had been trebled in numbers and equipment. Relieved of anxieties about the French army in Tunisia to the westward, Marshal Graziani could concentrate all his troops for an advance on Egypt. The conquest of Egypt and the seizure of the Suez Canal was to be Italy's main task in the Axis war. Furthermore, as already described, the collapse of France disorganized our naval dis-

positions in the Mediterranean and placed the Italian Fleet, which should have been fresh and ready for action with all its units in perfect repair, in a position of naval superiority. To add to General Wavell's anxieties, large Italian forces in East Africa were in a position to threaten the Sudan and thus attack Egypt by the back door, so to speak ; and, in the event, attempts were made to this end. Fortunately, one of the few British mechanized and armoured divisions was with the Army of the Nile. Its officers and the crews of the tanks and armoured cars were well trained in desert fighting. The Middle East Command of the Royal Air Force, inferior in numbers to the Italian Air Forces, was markedly superior in fighting efficiency.

Undoubtedly Marshal Graziani's chief mistake was in not striking at once with such forces as he had in Cyrenaica. Instead of doing this, he waited to bring up more divisions from Tripolitania. A good hard metalled road runs all along the coast of Italian North Africa from the borders of Tunisia to the Egyptian frontier. Nevertheless, it took time to move the enormous equipment required. On the other hand, our smaller but more mobile forces struck at once. General Wavell invaded Italian territory and his mobile forces made a number of surprise attacks on the Italian formations. We still further delayed the advance of the Italian army of invasion by brilliant guerilla tactics. This initiative won valuable time for the Army of the Nile. Although

an invasion of the British Isles was expected and the British Expeditionary Force on the continent of Europe had lost practically all its equipment in the evacuations from Dunkirk and the French ports, the importance of Egypt in the whole scheme of Imperial strategy was realized in London. Strong reinforcements were sent. Welcome additions to the Army of the Nile were Free French troops recruited in Egypt or who managed to make their way from Palestine into Syria, and Polish units which had formed part of General Weygand's army and insisted on joining the British.

I have described how the most urgently needed equipment, including Hurricane fighters for Malta and Egypt, was successfully convoyed through the Mediterranean. Other reinforcements reached Egypt by way of the Cape of Good Hope, and from Australia, New Zealand and India. General Wavell's delaying tactics prevented the Italians from making any large-scale advance, therefore, till 13 September, 1940. They then took the little coastal town and small harbour of Sollum and advanced to Sidi Barrani. There the Italians sat down and proceeded to dig themselves in, while their supplies of petrol and other stores were brought up. Seventy miles away across an inhospitable desert were the main British forces, such as they were, entrenched at Mersa Matruh. This important position is 170 miles by railway from Alexandria and is itself the railhead. There are also good road communications. Graziani

apparently thought that we would sit down at Mersa Matruh to await his assault when the weather was cooler.

Though we eventually abandoned 130 miles of desert east of the frontier, all the fighting during the first two months after Italy came into the war was on the Italian side of the frontier. By the end of July the Italian losses totalled 1,500 against our 50, and we had captured or destroyed 16 guns, 15 tanks, and 65 motor vehicles. Our mobile forces had raided the enemy forts, ambushed their convoys, and harassed them with such persistence that Marshal Graziani, as he has since confessed, came to the conclusion that we had a full armoured division on the upper plateau, and felt he must change his plans. The Italian Staff had meant to make a flanking attack on Sidi Barrani, but, fearing that our strength on the plateau was too great, decided to advance on the coast road. The initial Italian advance to Sidi Barrani was not strongly opposed, and we contented ourselves with harassing operations and air raiding. One of the reasons for the Italian delay in beginning the invasion of Egypt proper was that the forces it was intended to use were so numerous that it was thought necessary to lay down a water pipe line so as to economize in motor transport.

Egypt has a large army, which has received much British military training and is comparatively well equipped. The Egyptian Cabinet declared its intentions of fulfilling the terms of alliance with



Great Britain at the beginning of the war, and that this army would help to defend Egypt if Egyptian territory was invaded. Apparently, however, the Western Desert, which forms one of the Egyptian ramparts of defence, was not regarded as Egyptian territory. Though the attitude of the Egyptian Government has been generally correct, General Wavell was not given the help of Egyptian troops.

To appreciate the operations which followed the Italian advance to Sidi Barrani, it is necessary to consider the topography of the Western Desert. On Egyptian territory the coastal road from Alexandria is the only road suitable for heavy traffic ; as far as Mersa Matruh the railway runs parallel with it, but beyond Mersa Matruh the road alone links the Nile Valley with the western frontier of Egypt. When the Nile Valley has been left behind, road and railway pass through the Coastal Belt, a featureless, undulating plain of red earth, dotted with scrub, around which the wind has piled sand in dunes which make the terrain difficult for mechanical transport. In rainy weather the country becomes impassable. This belt, which is as much as twenty-five miles wide, is not ill-supplied with water from shallow wells, and a good deal of it is cultivated. Towards Mersa Matruh it narrows to some five miles, and cultivation is limited to the hollows. Inland from it rises the first desert terrace, an undulating expanse some hundred feet above sea-

level, rock partly overlaid with fertile loam which, after rain, makes a barrier impassable for cars.

About twenty-five miles to the south comes the escarpment of the Great Libyan Plateau, flat limestone desert, practicable for motor traffic, and crossed by tracks whose direction is controlled by the few wells, perhaps a dozen, which can be trusted to yield a scanty supply of water. West of Mersa Matruh the coastal belt is of light, dazzling white sand, and the road is deflected to the higher terrace until halfway to Sidi Barrani, where it descends again to the coastal belt, which here widens out but is sandy and only cultivated in patches. From south of Sidi Barrani the desert plateau falls back in a great arc, and then comes up to the sea, its cliffs forming the little sheltered harbour of Sollum.

From Mersa Matruh a serviceable track runs south-west for 160 miles across the Libyan plateau to the Siwa Oasis; this fertile valley, seventy feet below sea level, famous as the site of the temple of Ammon, visited by Alexander the Great, and inhabited by some five thousand Libyan Berbers, is the extreme western outpost of Egypt. Separated from it by only a narrow ridge of rock is the vast Quattara depression whose salt marshes, with shifting sand dunes to the south of them, impede approach to the Nile Valley. The western limit of the high desert plateau forms an almost straight line running north and south from Sollum; the boundary with Italian Libya is west of it, on the lower ground, and

here the Italians put up, in 1932, a barbed-wire fence twelve feet across and five feet high, with garrisoned posts along it, including those of Amseat, Capuzzo, and Maddalena. It has generally been considered that the only route practicable for large forces between Egypt and Libya is that along the coast, through Mersa Matruh and along the land bridge which divides the Mediterranean from the Quattara depression. South of that depression there are, indeed, tracks through Siwa and other oases to the Middle Nile, but they have been considered too difficult for anything more than raiding parties.

Prior to the events I am about to describe, the Right Honourable Anthony Eden, M.P., Secretary of State for War, and General Sir John Dill, K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., who had succeeded Field Marshal Sir Edmund Ironside as Chief of the Imperial General Staff in the previous May, visited the Middle East and conferred with the commanders of the British sea and air forces, with the Egyptian Government, and with General Smuts, Prime Minister and Defence Minister of the Union of South Africa. The Secretary of State for War and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff visited Khartoum in the Sudan, Palestine and Transjordan, and the army headquarters of Mersa Matruh in the Western Desert.

The British plan of campaign which had been decided upon was to take the initiative again and attack the Italians at Sidi Barrani early in November.

In the meantime, Mussolini had thought fit to attack one of the smallest and poorest States in Europe, the kingdom of Greece. I have already described the reasons for our decision to support the Greeks. The most convenient reinforcements which could be sent to them were squadrons of aeroplanes in the Middle East Command. These were sent, and our counter-attack had to await reinforcements from England and elsewhere. Nevertheless, on 13 November, 1940, the Royal Air Force began the preliminaries for our counter-attack. A series of heavy air raids was made on Sidi Barrani, Derna, Bardia, and Benghazi. We had by this time achieved a working command of the air in all the African fields of warfare, and we never relinquished it. On December 8th the Royal Navy took a hand in this affair, and carried out a series of heavy bombardments of the Italian positions from the sea. On that night, 8 December, 1940, the Italian bases at Maktila were heavily shelled. Sidi Barrani was also a target. On the night of December 9th-10th Maktila and Sidi Barrani were again heavily attacked in co-operation with the Fleet Air Arm and the Royal Air Force. In all these operations fine service was performed by shallow-draught gunboats built for the great Chinese rivers, and which had been brought from the China station for the purpose. Their shallow draught not only enabled them to go close inshore, but they were particularly hard to hit with torpedoes. This was important, as

the only counter-action attempted by the Italian Navy was to send an occasional submarine. The monitor *Terror*, a veteran of the last war, and used ever since as a gunnery training ship, was also useful.

It is a pity that we have neglected to build more monitors. They are particularly useful craft for combined operations ; yet, at the beginning of the present war, the *Terror* was the only monitor on the Navy List.

On 7 December, 1940, the British attacking force set out from Mersa Matruh—thanks to our air superiority this movement was unnoticed. Most of the traffic moved by night, the tanks and other vehicles lying camouflaged in the desert in the daytime. If the Italians noticed any movement, they probably thought it was another of our raiding parties which had been active in the desert ever since Italy entered the war.

The Army of the Nile was commanded by General Sir Henry Wilson, under General Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East.

The British invading army was commanded by Major-General R. M. O'Connor, D.S.O., M.C., fifty-one years of age, and an officer of great experience. In the Great War of 1914-18 he served in France and Belgium, in the Cameronians, and at the end of 1917 was transferred to Italy, and helped in the final defeat of the Austrians, being granted the Italian silver medal for valour for his leadership of the Honourable Artillery Company in the crossing

of the River Piave. He was also awarded the Distinguished Service Order and bar, the Military Cross, and nine mentions in dispatches. He was made a brevet major in 1917 and a brevet lieutenant-colonel in December 1926. He served as Governor of Jerusalem during the troubles in Palestine, and on the north-west frontier of India before the present war. General O'Connor was surprised and captured by the Germans during General Rommel's counter-attack.

The Italian army was deployed as follows: holding Sidi Barrani and the outlying forts were two Libyan divisions, one Colonial, and one Blackshirt division. The mechanized force under General Maletti was holding the large fortified camp of Debiwa in the south. A colonial division and a Blackshirt division were on the lines of communication between Fort Capuzzo and Halfaya. Three divisions were in reserve, divided between Bardia and Tobruk. There were thus eight divisions threatening Egypt, and a mechanized force equal to a division.

The attack on the Italian encampments and fortified positions was a complete surprise. This assault was so unexpected that at the moment when it was being delivered the second Blackshirt division in Sidi Barrani was in process of being relieved by the fourth Blackshirts.

The mobile group in Fort Debiwa was overcome and the position occupied within an

hour. The tanks and vehicles were seized before the Italians had time to bring them into action. General Maletti, Divisional Commander, was killed. The camp at Tummar, between Debiwa and Sidi Barrani, fell immediately afterwards, together with the fortified position of Maktila ; and in the afternoon of December 11th Sidi Barrani was taken by a frontal assault with the bayonet. The garrison included an entire army corps. Three generals were taken prisoner, and the whole of the stores and equipment concentrated for the invasion of Egypt fell into our hands. Without pausing, General O'Connor's forces drove forward, and took Buq-Buq, Halfaya, and Sollum. The capture of the desert forts of El Azeiz and Capuzzo followed, and practically the whole of Graziani's army of invasion was either killed, captured, or chased into Bardia. Escape from Bardia by the coast road was prevented by our armoured forces making the road to the westward of Bardia. In the first phase of these operations the Army of the Nile took thirty-eight thousand prisoners, one hundred guns, and many hundreds of motor vehicles, including scores of tanks. The armoured division in the operations was commanded by Major-General Michael O'Moore Creagh, formerly of the Seventh Hussars. The Indian troops were under the command of Major-General Beresford-Peirse. During these operations the Mediterranean Fleet supported the right flank of our army by keeping the enemy lines of communication under almost continuous

bombardment, often at close range, despite the opposition of the enemy shore batteries.

On the night of 13-14 December, 1940, Bardia, now invested, came under battleship fire. Some Italian motor-torpedo-boats in Bardia harbour made one half-hearted attack on the bombarding ships, which was driven off. On December 14th the Italian submarine *Naiade* was sighted, forced to dive, and destroyed with depth charges. Bardia was taken after a siege and heavy assaults by the Australian infantry. It had been continuously bombed from the air and shelled from the sea. The Italians fought stubbornly, and suffered casualties amounting to 241 officers and 42,827 men killed or made prisoner. Amongst the immense amount of material captured or destroyed was 368 medium and field guns, 26 heavy anti-aircraft guns, 68 light guns, 13 medium tanks, 117 light tanks, and 708 motor transport vehicles. Before the fall of the fortress and town of Bardia, General Francesco Argentino, who had started his career in the regular Italian army, and afterwards became a professional Fascist, abandoned his soldiers, and tried to escape. He was captured seven miles east of Tobruk on foot.

The Italian High Command believed that Bardia was impregnable. Its defences on the land side were particularly strong, and its garrison was more numerous than the attacking force. Our own officers were astonished at the strength of the defences they had captured. Furthermore, the



Italians fought here with courage and obstinacy. This victory was accomplished because of the following factors :

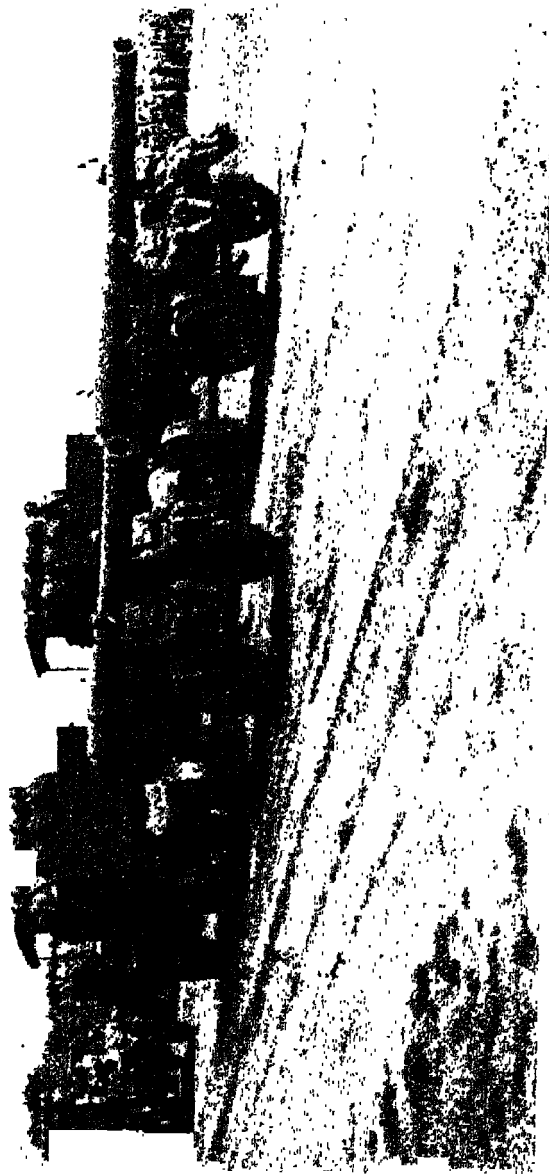
(1) The Royal Air Force had established complete ascendancy over the Regia Aeronautico. The Italian aircraft were literally driven out of the skies. Their aerodromes were bombed and rendered useless, and great numbers of machines destroyed on the ground. Terrific bombing attacks were delivered on the ground fortifications and on every concentration of Italian tanks and troops. Our forces were immune from ground strafing or bombing by the Italians, and our supply columns could move up with little danger of molestation. As a senior Italian officer taken prisoner described it, "Your airmen and your ships never gave us any rest. Bombs and shells seemed to be exploding on our defences night and day. No wonder it wore down the morale of our troops. Your heavy bombers were terrifying."

(2) The Royal Navy was able to bombard the Bardia defences at will, their range being corrected by aeroplanes spotting for them overhead.

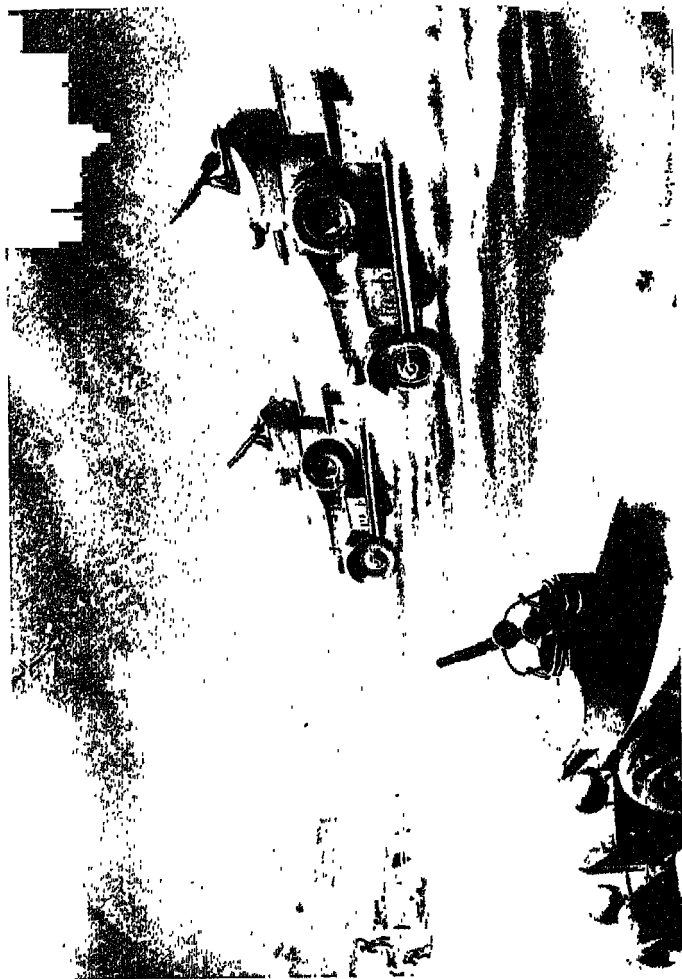
(3) The shooting of our mechanized land artillery was excellent.

(4) The Australian and British infantry worked in perfectly with our tanks.

(5) Owing to the bombarding and shelling the Italian commissariat arrangements broke down. Some of the Italian prisoners had eaten no food for three days, and the water shortage was acute. Many



YUGOSLAV HEAVY ARTILLERY



BRITISH ARMoured CARS IN ACTION

of these prisoners were bare-footed, their boots having been worn out. Italian soldiers, unwounded and otherwise quite fit, had to be given lifts in British lorries after they had surrendered because of the state of their feet. The nerves of many of the officers broke down, and when they surrendered they were weeping like children.

Once the outer defences were taken and the fall of the city became inevitable, the fight went out of the Italians. All they thought about was surrendering as quickly as possible. Half a dozen British privates would take charge of several thousand prisoners. They would be told to dump their arms, and were then marched down to the sea. One column of 1,700 soldiers was marched to the port of Sollum for embarkation in charge of one British military policeman ! Some of these prisoners fell out from the column to climb the rocks and take a short cut to the port. None of them tried to escape, and all were docile and amenable. A flying officer of the Royal Air Force who flew over the battlefield in a reconnaissance aircraft towards the end, gave the following description of the state of affairs :

On Sunday I was detailed to fly over the Bardia defences. Only one complete Italian battery was firing, but other isolated guns were still pumping shells into a wadi (the dried-up bed of a river) to the north, where our infantry had established a base. At about half past nine, I saw six of our tanks snaking their way towards the battery, pouring out yellow flashes of fire without interruption. Their fire must have been very accurate, because when I

was within two hundred yards of the enemy the opposing fire ceased and I saw the Italian gunners running forward waving their hats and jackets. I was circling round at about one hundred and fifty feet and got a wonderful view of our infantry which were following the tanks and mopping up the Italians as they came running from their entrenchments. I dived on a detachment of our troops, and dropped a message directing them to some isolated groups of Italians who were obviously anxious to surrender. I saw one column of prisoners about a thousand yards long slowly wending its way from Bardia to Capuzzo, apparently unescorted.

After the fall of Bardia there was a general collapse of the will to resistance of the Italian soldiers in the field, until the final battle of Beda Famm, when the principal forces remaining of Marshal Graziani's once great army were intercepted on the coast road south of Benghazi, and tried to fight their way through. Both infantry and tanks then fought with great gallantry.

The siege of Bardia ended on 3 January, 1941.

On 22 January the even more important position, from our point of view, of Tobruk, with the best harbour in Italian North Africa and an important naval base, was taken. Here was found out of action and burning the Italian cruiser *San Gorgio*. She was an old but powerful vessel with a main armament of four 10-inch guns mounted in two armoured turrets. As Tobruk was chosen as the main defensive position by the British forces when General Rommel counter-attacked in Cyren-

aica with his three armoured divisions, and has been the scene of a great siege, it is important to understand the nature of the town and harbour. The harbour of Tobruk is formed by a promontory which runs from west to east and encloses a basin some 4,100 yards long by 1,625 yards wide at its entrance; the rocky and barren promontory rises to 120 feet with steep sides sloping to the water's edge; the harbour, thus protected on all sides except the east, from which side the wind seldom blows, is usable in all weathers. It has a depth of forty-three feet in the centre, and of thirty-three feet up to within a thousand yards of the extreme western end of the inlet. It is one of the best natural harbours on the North African coast. The town, which was the first place to be captured by the Italians from the Turks in 1911, lies on the south slope of the promontory facing the harbour. It has been almost entirely rebuilt by the Italians, and is laid out on a rectangular plan with the main streets parallel to the shore. It is, for the most part, stone built, and contains municipal offices, a wireless station, barracks, and other military buildings, a hospital, two hotels, and a cinema. Tobruk is the capital of the district of Marmarica, the population of which is about 10,000. The population of the town itself was, in 1937, 4,130, of whom 420 were Italians and 210 Jews. In 1939 the Italians numbered 822. The water supply is poor, and drinking water used to be brought by tanker from Derna. There is

a customs house fronting on the harbour, and there are three wooden jetties, the largest of which can take steamers of medium tonnage lying alongside. The town is enclosed by a modern defensive wall which runs down to the water's edge. Since the outbreak of war strong defences had been constructed on the landward side. These were sited to control the heads of the roads issuing from Tobruk.

From the back of the harbour two roads run southwards, with hairpin bends to take the sharp gradient of the escarpment and reach the desert terrace. One road turns eastwards along the lower terrace to Bardia, another continues southwards to El Adem, which is the junction of the southern Sollum road and of that to Jarabub on the Egyptian frontier. The northern road to Bardia is metalled and tarred ; the El Adem road is not macadamized, but is in good condition. From the town a metalled road runs westwards along the lower terrace to Derna. South of this a track, unmetalled but fit for motor traffic, joins the good road from El Adem to Mechili, the nodal point of the Apollonia road system.

General O'Connor's tactics at Tobruk were masterly. A feint attack was first made, which induced the Italians to expose the positions of their heavy guns. The naval bombarding ships and our aeroplanes silenced these heavy guns. The main attack was then made on the eastern side of the perimeter, where the enemy least expected it. It succeeded, and our forces made straight for the

harbour, outflanking the inner defences, and left the mopping-up on the far side until later. The whole operation took thirty-six hours.

General Wavell's original plan of campaign had been to advance as far as Tobruk, and, after capturing the place, to dig in, believing that all immediate danger of a further Italian attack on Egypt would now be removed. The collapse of Italian resistance was so complete, however, that it was decided to press on and take the whole of the province of Cyrenaica. From Derna a first-class road follows the coast to Benghazi, the capital of the province. Along this road the Australian troops advanced as rapidly as possible. The Italian General Staff expected the attack on Benghazi to come from this direction. Most of Marshal Graziani's tanks and his remaining infantry had retreated to Benghazi. General O'Connor now decided on a very bold move. The armoured forces were ordered to move south of Jebel Akdar, crossing the rough and practically roadless country, and to strike the coast road beyond Benghazi.

The northern part of the province of Cyrenaica juts out into the Mediterranean in the form of a great hump, with Benghazi at the western corner, and Derna at the eastern. The direct route over this wild and difficult country was 150 miles, and the forced march by this armoured division was accomplished in thirty hours. It was a short cut, but with many natural obstacles. Before making this



march our armoured forces were concentrated at Mechili, fifty miles south-west of Derna. This forced march over the mountains and desert began on 3 February, 1941. It is a great tribute to the mechanical excellence of our tanks and armoured vehicles that they had already advanced four hundred miles from the railhead at Mersa Matruh and defeated the enemy in five important actions in fifty-six days. Part of this forced march was through blinding sandstorms. There was some slight opposition on the way. Our armoured cars and tanks reached the coast road just in front of the head of the main Italian column retreating from Benghazi, and then was fought the great battle of Beda Famm.

The surprise was complete. Captured Italian generals admitted that they had discussed the possibility of the British advancing along this southern route across country, but decided it was impossible in the time. Their calculations were that the main British attack would take place along the coast road from Tobruk. There would be no time to fortify Benghazi or prepare positions, and it was decided to retreat to Tripoli.

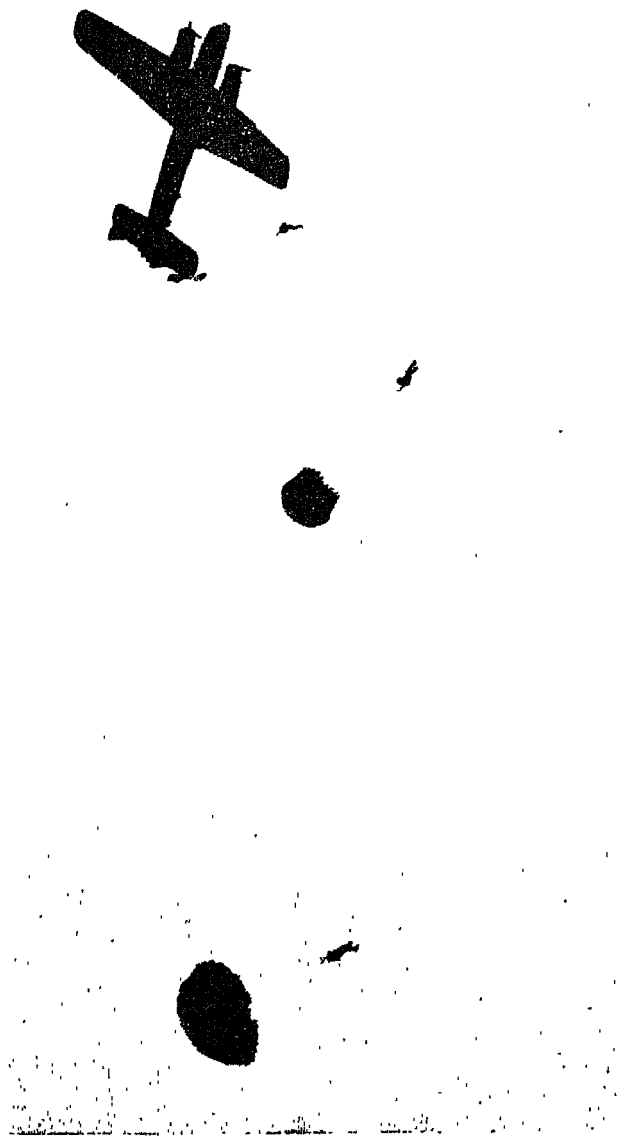
The British tanks just had time to form a line of battle, taking advantage of the configuration of the ground so that, while their guns could fire over the skyline, the bodies of their tanks were hidden, when the head of the leading Italian column came within range. Not expecting action, the Italian tanks, over a hundred in number, were in column of route, and

at a great disadvantage. The British cruiser tanks arriving a little later, at an opportune time, were able to outflank the Italian columns, which never had the opportunity to deploy into line of battle. Nevertheless, the enemy attacked with great persistence for fifteen hours in one of the hottest tank and armoured car battles of this war. They were outclassed and outmanœuvred. When sixty Italian tanks had been destroyed the fight was given up. Only two Italian tanks and four armoured cars succeeded in escaping into the desert, and they, presumably, reached Tripoli. We captured more than 10,000 prisoners, including eight generals, 103 field guns, 2 heavy anti-aircraft guns, and 20 light anti-aircraft guns; 107 medium tanks were captured or destroyed.

The town of Benghazi surrendered without opposition. We captured there a small but usable harbour, great quantities of military stores, a sea-plane base, and two important airfields. This was the end of what may be described as the first Libyan campaign, for, as already stated, our patrols reached the little town of El Agheila on 8 February, 1941. This place, of less than 1,000 inhabitants, with police barracks, a wireless station, and an emergency landing ground, is the last point of any importance before the great desert of Sirte. It is 175 miles by road from Benghazi, and ten miles from the borders of Tripolitania.

One of the main arguments used to excuse our

failure to follow up this victory by completing the conquest of Italian North Africa in an advance on Tripoli, is that our troops needed rest and our vehicles an overhaul. Certainly, the speed of the advance, considering the immense distances covered and the difficult terrain, was remarkable. It compares more than favourably with the famous blitzkrieg campaign, in which the mechanized divisions of the German army swept forward from the eastern frontier of Belgium to the Channel ports. This offensive was launched on 10 May, 1940, and on May 13th Sedan was reached, a distance of eighty kilometres, giving an advance of twenty-seven kilometres a day; Abbeville, 208 kilometres farther on, was reached on May 21st, giving an advance of twenty-five and a half kilometres per day; the occupation of Dunkirk, 128 kilometres farther still, took place on June 4th, giving an advance of nine and a half kilometres a day, which included the delay caused by the defence of the town. The Somme offensive, which must be regarded as a quite separate operation, started on June 4th. Paris was entered on June 14th, an advance including fighting, of fourteen and a half kilometres a day, and on June 27th, two days after the armistice had put a stop to any lingering opposition on the part of the French, the Germans on the Spanish frontier, having advanced at the rate of ninety-nine kilometres a day. Between the Somme and Paris advance was slow, and only the unopposed dash



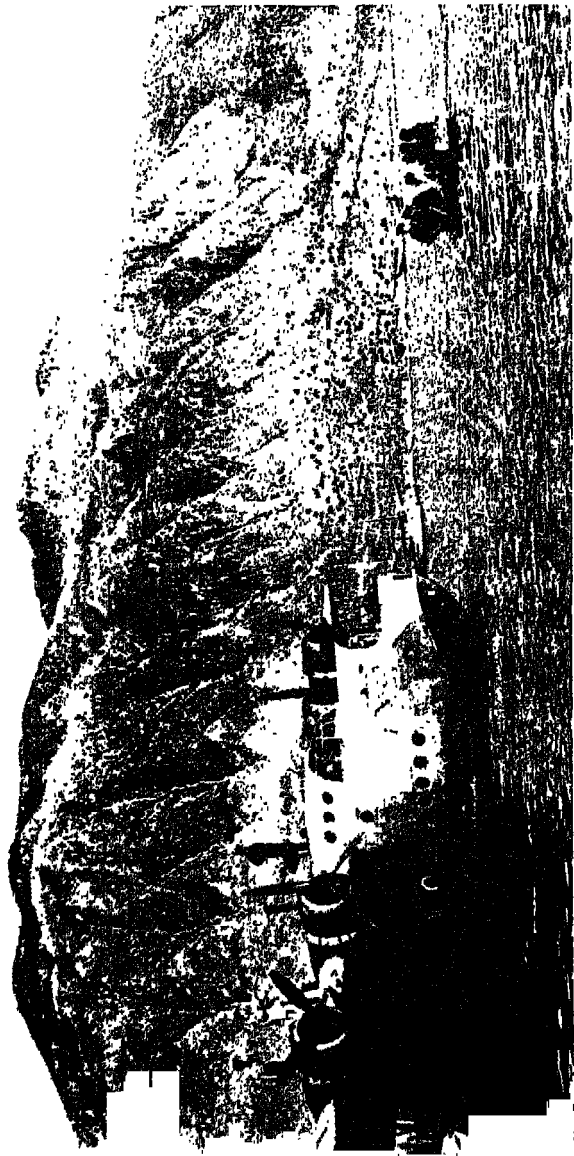
PARACHUTE TROOPS LEAVING THEIR AEROPLANE



PARACHUTIST ABOUT TO LAND



SOLDIER JUST LANDED, GATHERING IN PARACHUTE



R.A.F. PERSONNEL LEAVING GREECE BY SUNDERLAND FLYING-BOAT

from Poitiers to the Spanish frontier gave an average rate of progress exceeding thirty-two kilometres a day. It must be pointed out that the weather conditions were favourable throughout, and that the invaders had the advantage of the magnificent network of the French road system. Petrol and food could be obtained everywhere en route. None the less, it was a striking example of speed in modern warfare.

This can now be compared with later performances. General Wavell's offensive in Libya started from Mersa Matruh on 7 December, 1940. On December 11th he captured Sidi Barrani, an advance of sixty-four kilometres in two days. Benghazi fell on February 6th, the last battle being fought rather more than 880 kilometres by road from Mersa Matruh, an average advance of fifteen kilometres a day. This included the time required for the investment and capture of a whole string of strongly fortified positions. In the last seven days, the advance from Derna to the battlefield of Beda Famm, south of Benghazi, together with the capture of that city, was accomplished at the average rate of fifty-five kilometres a day. The whole operation took place in a country where there exists only one good road; for much of the way the mechanized columns made their way through trackless deserts of rock and sand hillocks cut by deep torrent beds, with scorching sun by day and frost by night, while sandstorms blotted out the horizon and sometimes



made movement impossible. All water, food, petrol, and ammunition had to be brought by motor lorries from a distant base, and all repairs had to be carried out on the spot. As a feat of endurance both by men and by machines, the Libyan campaign far surpasses that of the German forces in France.

General Wavell's advance from Mersa Matruh to Benghazi was at much the same rate of speed as that of the German mechanized forces from the Belgian frontier to Abbeville, but whereas the Germans had to deal only with defended positions on the frontier, the British had to capture Sidi Barrani with its supporting forts, Sollum, Capuzzo, Bardia, and Tobruk, and to fight a long and obstinate battle at Beda Famm.

How was it that the whole campaign was so quickly finished? The Italian High Command believed that Bardia was impregnable, and British officers were astonished at the strength of the defences which they had captured. Tobruk was only less strong. Both places were held by strong garrisons with numerous artillery, and the British testify to the fact that the Italians often showed great courage and obstinacy. In the final battle of Beda Famm they fought more desperately than they had in any earlier engagement. This is even more to their credit when it is remembered that previous defeats had shaken their morale. In 1918 the German army surrendered when only about a third of its personnel had been made prisoners, and half

its guns captured. Graziani's army of Cyrenaica had lost more than two-thirds of its men as prisoners and nearly three-quarters of its artillery, yet at Beda Famm the tanks charged again and again, and the infantry advanced for thirty hours against the British forces blocking their path. General Wavell's victories were not won through the cowardice of the enemy. British casualties were remarkably light, less than two thousand in number.

Military students and historians will argue in future years as to whether the advance into Tripolitania should have been undertaken, or whether it was right for General Wavell to be content with the conquest of Cyrenaica. Those who support the decision not to advance further, in addition to stressing the need for rest and refitment, point to the great length of the lines of communication already established. From Alexandria to the edge of the desert of Sirte is some seven hundred miles. It is another six hundred miles to Tripoli. There was apparently some fear of enemy landings on the flank of this line, which, for topographical reasons, must lie mainly along the coast. On the other hand, we could use the sea passages along the coast, and should have been able to deny these to the enemy.

There was another consideration.

The day after Benghazi fell into our hands and the remnants of Graziani's army were killed or captured, a note was received from the Greek Government inviting us to send all available help in view of the

threatening attitude of Germany. It was not impossible that the Germans, instead of attacking the Greeks, might have attempted an invasion of Turkey. They might have done both. In any case, we wished to be in a position to give help to both our allies as required. Before the decision was finally taken to halt the North African campaign and send the Expeditionary Force to the Balkans, Mr. Eden and General Sir John Dill flew out again for a further conference with Admiral Cunningham, Air Marshal Longmore, and General Wavell, the three commanders-in-chief in the Middle East. The decision was taken with all the available information in mind ; but the available facts were, unfortunately, not complete. As already described, there was a failure on the part of our Intelligence Service to gather information about the German movements of reinforcement. When news of this was received it was grossly inaccurate with regard to the strength of the German diversion. By conquering Tripolitania, and we had good military prospects of accomplishing this, we would probably have scotched these German plans. Even if landings could not be prevented altogether, we would have had accurate information about them through being on the spot. The most important advantage of all of a successful conquest of Tripolitania was from the naval point of view. I have described the dangers of the Sicilian Channel under modern air conditions. If we could hold part of the African side of the narrowest part

of the Mediterranean this danger from air attack on our shipping using the Channel would be reduced. Convoys could hug the African shore. The captured aerodromes could be used by the Royal Air Force to give protection. The Royal Air Force would be conveniently based for counter-attack on the aerodromes in Sicily. With our growing strength it might have been possible to organize an expeditionary force to invade the island of Sicily, and so add still further to the discomfiture of the weaker Axis partner. All the above provided strong strategical reasons for continuing the advance if we could possibly contrive to do so. There was also an important political consideration to be borne in mind.

The French colonies in North Africa had been in a state of unrest ever since the capitulation by the Bordeaux Government. General de Gaulle had many adherents, especially in Tunisia, the French inhabitants of which were, and are, in fear of being handed over to the tender mercies of Mussolini and his Fascists as a spoil of war. A successful extension of the campaign to Tripolitania might well have turned the waverers in Tunisia over to the side of Free France and the Allied cause. There would then have been important repercussions in Algeria and Morocco, right across Africa to the shores of the Atlantic.

If the troops needed rest and the vehicles an overhaul, could they not have had these and then the advance have been resumed? If we had not

troops enough to spare in the Middle East Command to send help to the Greeks and also continue the campaign in North Africa, does not this seem to point to our being over-insured in Great Britain? During this time we maintained for home defence an immense army, with lavish equipment, against the danger of an invasion in force by the German army. Another three or four divisions from this vast home defence army would have made a great difference in North Africa. If it was right to send reinforcements in the autumn of 1940, after the collapse of France, to the Middle East, and the decision was surely correct, then should we not have maintained this flow of reinforcements? Shipping difficulties existed. Most of the ships carrying our equipment and troops had to sail by the Cape route. These shipping difficulties may give the real answer to the cause of our subsequent plight.

It has been argued also that we spent too much effort in re-conquering British Somaliland and conquering the so-called Italian East African Empire of Abyssinia, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland. It is suggested that after a few preliminary defeats of the Italian armies on the various frontiers, they should have been left alone, except for a blockading of their supplies, and that we should have contented ourselves with supporting the Abyssinian patriots. Then, it is argued, we would have had more troops and aeroplanes both for the defence of Egypt and the Balkans campaign. Against this line of thought,

however, must be set a very solid gain in the liquidation of the Duke of Aosta's armies. The occupation of the Italian side of the Red Sea by the Imperial forces removed this area from the combat zones of the war. This enabled President Roosevelt to act legally in permitting American supplies to be sent direct to the Red Sea ports for transshipment to Egypt.

Whatever may be the considered opinion of the historian of the future, with all the facts before him, as to the correctness or otherwise of the decision not to advance further, there can be no excuse for our failure to anticipate the counter-attack. The Japanese have a wise saying: "In the moment of victory tighten your helmet-strings." In other words, directly you have won a campaign, lose not a day in consolidating your position, and making all secure against an enemy riposte. In the event, General Sir Henry Wilson was appointed Governor of Cyrenaica, and his civil and technical assistants began the study of the difficult problem of what to do with the Italian settlers, farming land filched from the Arabs, and generally restoring normal life. No further danger from Tripolitania appears to have been anticipated, and very light mechanized forces, less than a brigade, were left to guard the western frontier of Cyrenaica. The awakening, when it came, was a rude one.

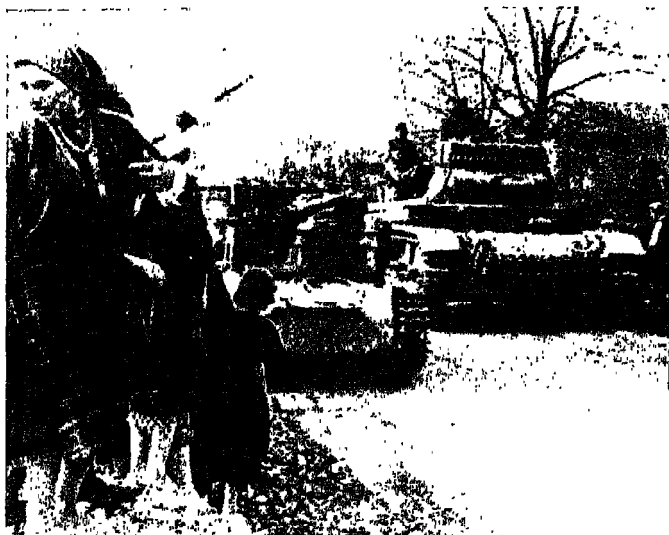
The conquest of this fair province of Cyrenaica, on which so much effort and money had been spent

by the Italians since it was wrested from Turkey in 1911, was a bitter blow to the Mussolini regime. On 5 January, 1941, Signor Ansaldo, the star broadcaster of Italy, made a highly emotional speech by wireless to the Italian people after the capture of Bardia, following on the overwhelming of the Italian army of invasion at Sidi Barrani. "We said warning," declared Ansaldo, "and we repeat it. That which comes to us from that strip of Africa between the desert and the sea, hammered by artillery, attacked by tanks, is a hard, a solemn, let us say terrible, warning to every one of us in Italy. It is a warning to all Italians, rich and poor, leaders or subordinates. Woe to all those who on this sunny winter afternoon have not given a single thought to what is going on in the Marmaric. Woe to all those in their twenties who, in their usual café or their usual haunt, have not felt a burning desire to be down there with the defenders of Port Bardia to give them a hand and hold fast with them. Woe to those in their forties who in the pleasures of their homes and families have not felt, if even for a second, a virile regret that they can no longer carry a rifle as in the spring of their youth. Woe to those who, on hearing the communiqués in these last few days, have not felt their hearts suffocate with anxiety and curiosity while they were passing their time at some football match or some more or less stupid film. Woe to all those who, hearing such a bulletin as that issued to-day, can still go about their humdrum little



*Left to right: GENERAL SIMOVICH, KING PETER OF  
YUGOSLAVIA, GENERAL BOGOLYB ILITCH*





GERMAN TANKS PASSING THROUGH BULGARIA



GREEK MOUNTAIN ARTILLERY

affairs and their humdrum little amusements in their usual way, and who do not feel it their duty while the battle of Bardia is raging to pass five minutes in silence in the secret of their hearts. None of these are Italians worthy of the name. In their petty arrogance and egoism they delude themselves if they think that they can go on living like this, remote from any discomfort, while others are fighting a war to which they do not even give a thought."

## CHAPTER VII

### DRANG NACH OSTEN

AT THE BEGINNING OF 1941, WHEN THE German High Command decided to open the year's campaign by making the Mediterranean the main combat zone, so far as land fighting was concerned, they were reviving an old German plan for world domination. From the beginning of the present century the Prussian Imperialists had been working on schemes for a drive to the eastward. Kaiser Wilhelm II and his advisers were attempting to follow in the footsteps of Napoleon. The great Corsican planned to conquer Egypt and Syria and then to reach India by the overland route. It was first necessary for the German imitators to obtain control of the Balkans. Here a willing partner was found in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the rulers of which had long sought to extend southwards. The break-up of the Turkish Empire in Europe facilitated this plan. The pretensions of Austria in the Balkans, with German backing, alarmed the Russians. Whenever the Government of Czarist Russia was in a strong position and in an expansionist mood, it in its turn had sought to reach the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus through the Balkans. The Crimean War, in the

middle of the last century, was fought to prevent this very development at a time when the German Reich had not been reconstituted. Britain and France fought with Turkey to prevent such an accession to Russian strength as to upset the balance of power in Europe.

The clash of Russian and Austrian interests in the Balkans was one of the main causes of the war of 1914-18. German policy during all these years was one of peaceful penetration, so far as Turkey was concerned. A network of railways was financed and built in Anatolia under the auspices of the great German banks, and these development works carried with them important mining and other concessions. The trunk railway line to Baghdad, to be extended to the head of the Persian Gulf, was part of the same policy. When this was built, there would be direct rail communications from Hamburg via Berlin right across Europe through the Balkans and Turkey to the Indian Ocean. This policy was opposed by Britain for many years, but, in the end, the pre-1914 government in London withdrew its opposition to the German plans, and the engineers set to work on this great railway system. This was an early example of appeasement.

The railway was not complete when war broke out in 1914, but it was finished under other auspices during Germany's eclipse in the years before the present war. During all this time German commercial and diplomatic influence was growing in Turkey

and was so strong by 1914 that Turkey threw in her lot with the Central Powers.

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler interprets the Drang Nach Osten in a different way. In this book, supposed to have been written by Hitler himself in prison, the East meant southern Russia and the riches of the Ukraine. On becoming Chancellor and Führer of Germany, Hitler was apparently influenced by the same school of German politicians whose predecessors had surrounded the Kaiser. Influential members of the Army General Staff leant towards the policy of a rapprochement with the U.S.S.R.

The Nazi Government, having seized Austria, recommenced the penetration of the Balkans and Turkey by economic means. The Turkey they encountered in 1932 and onwards, however, was a very different State to the ramshackle Empire of Abdul Hamid. Shorn of its outlying provinces inhabited by alien peoples, which had been a source of weakness in later years, the new Turkey, largely created by Ataturk (Mustapha Kemal Pasha), is now a compact, homogeneous State which has exchanged minorities with Greece and is strongly nationalistic. The new Turkey was not attracted by the suggestion that it should be a bridge for a German drive to the East. As Nazi power waxed and bloodless victories against the Anglo-French policy of appeasement demonstrated its gain in strength and importance, German diplomats and agents with money resources

and propaganda gained adherents in the Balkan countries, especially when supported by a German-speaking minority. In the Arabic-speaking countries of Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Egypt, malcontents of various political complexions found sympathy and some solid support from these German emissaries. Where there are Arabic-speaking intellectuals dreaming of a pan-Arab movement they were promised support. In Palestine the section of Arabs led by the Mufti of Jerusalem, jealous of the increase in the Jewish population, were flattered and bribed by both German and Italian representatives. The Syrian Nationalists, anxious that the French mandate should be terminated, were encouraged. In Iraq, the Arab Nationalists, particularly the Baghdadi intellectuals, were peevish at the remnants of British control remaining under their treaty with Britain when their country was given its independence by the Power which had made its freedom from Turkish rule possible. In Egypt there has always been a strong Nationalist, as well as an active pan-Arab movement, and both were pandered to by Germany and Italy. The usual infiltration methods by spies posing as archaeologists, engineers, commercial travellers, diplomats, or tourists, were employed in all these countries, and in Persia as well. The object was to prepare the ground for the elimination of French and British influence in the Middle East as a preliminary to the expected war.

The seeds sown in these countries, as in the

parable, sometimes fell on stony ground. In other cases the Germans overreached themselves, as in Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey ; but enough of the seed fell on fertile soil to sprout into a harvest, and it was fertilized by the German victories in Europe in 1940 and subsequently.

The capitulation of France and the only too obvious weakness of the Vichy Government left a great gap in the Balkans and Asia Minor which the Nazis were ready to fill. For a century French influence had been great in all these countries. French culture, the French language, the prestige of France, her great part in the victory of 1918, her subsequent alliances, had created a system which, supported by her alliance with Britain, created a considerable obstacle to German pretensions.

The drive to the East now made rapid progress without a shot being fired. The incorporation of Austria and Czechoslovakia in the Nazi Reich placed Hungary in a difficult position. She was forced into the Axis system and compensated with territory in Transylvania, after Rumania had succumbed. The latter country and Bulgaria were undermined by the usual Nazi mixture of bribes, threats, and commercial penetration. Yugoslavia was expected to go the same way, and the government of the Regent, Prince Paul, and M. Tsvetkovitch actually agreed to join the Axis. The *coup d'état* under General Simovitch, supported by the young King, dashed German hopes of a peaceful conquest, and the

country had to be invaded by force, as will be described in a later chapter.

Greece was conquered, after Italy's rôle of seizing this important Mediterranean outpost had failed in accomplishment, and a strong German force was ferried across the Sicilian Channel from Italy to turn the tables on General Wavell in Cyrenaica. The main outlines of the German strategy were now clear. By fair means or foul a footing was to be gained in Syria, and from there an attack developed to the southwards through Palestine to threaten Egypt and the Suez Canal. This was one jaw of a pincers movement, the other being General Rommel's armoured divisions in North Africa. The British having been pinched out of Egypt, the way would be clear for the resumption of the drive to the East. Spain was to be cajoled or coerced into allowing German forces through the Peninsula to contain Gibraltar and hold the African and European sides of the Straits. The Petain-Darlan Government at Vichy would be expected to "co-operate," allowing Germany and Italy the use, for strategical purposes, of the French North African colonies. The Mediterranean would then be a German-Italian lake.

Those who are inclined to write off this plan as impossible of fulfilment underestimate the advantages enjoyed by a strong and well prepared aggressor in the modern weapons of war. The great deserts of North Africa and Asia Minor are negotiable by



mechanized forces. For some fifteen years commercial vehicles, suitable for desert conditions, have plied regularly between Damascus in Syria and Baghdad in Iraq, crossing the intervening three hundred miles of desert by way of Rutbah Wells. We have seen what properly prepared mechanized forces could do in North Africa in General Wavell's campaign for the conquest of Cyrenaica. If a bridge-head could be established in Syria, if the position of the British Fleet in the Mediterranean were rendered impossible, armoured and mechanized divisions could sweep in any direction across the deserts of Arabia, and even threaten India. The Germans, with their customary thoroughness, made careful preparations for these very operations. General Rommel's mechanized divisions in North Africa were better fitted for warfare in that kind of country than the corresponding forces of the Italians who had been colonizing and fighting there for thirty years. Not only were troop-carrying aeroplanes, each capable of carrying twenty-five to thirty fully equipped soldiers, prepared in great numbers, but flying petrol tanks, flying water tanks, and flying workshops for the repair of aeroplanes and tanks were provided. Picked bodies of fighting men underwent a long period of training in hothouses, the atmosphere reproducing conditions similar to those in the deserts, and inured to living on a minimum of water. A careful study was made of the conditions of desert flight, and much practical experience

gained in the operations of the Lufthansa, flying commercially. As the drive to the East progressed, the energy of the diplomatic intrigue and preparation increased. The first and most notable success in the diplomatic field was in Iraq.

The former portions of the Turkish Empire, known as Mesopotamia, after the ejection of the Turks in 1918, were governed by Britain under a mandate of the League of Nations until 1930. Our good friend, the Emir Feisal, had been turned out of Damascus by the French, and presently became King of Iraq, as it was now called. In 1930 a treaty was signed between Great Britain and Iraq which regularized the relations of the two countries, on much the same lines as those existing between Britain and Egypt. Perhaps the most important clause of the treaty reads as follows :

Should either country become engaged in war, the other will immediately aid as ally. In the event of or imminent menace of war, Iraq will furnish Britain on Iraq territory all facilities and assistance in its power, including use of railways, rivers, ports, aerodromes, and means of communication. Iraq grants Britain sites for air bases and right to maintain forces upon Iraq territory on the understanding that they do not constitute occupation or prejudice sovereign rights. Iraq agrees to afford, when requested, all possible facilities for movement of British forces in transit across Iraq.

In 1932, having set up the façade of constitutional government with an elected parliament and

a senate, Iraq was admitted to membership of the League of Nations. The country is unstable in that its population is riven by sectarian and racial differences. The tribes, mostly Shiah Mahommedans, are suspicious of the rival sect of the Sunnis, to which most of the intellectuals belong. They complain that political power is centred in Baghdad, and that the Sunni intellectuals in that city over-tax and exploit them. In the north is a Kurdish minority, 800,000 strong, who have staged a number of important rebellions. King Feisal was a good diplomat as well as a good soldier, and so long as he was alive he managed to hold the country together fairly successfully. He was devoted to the British alliance as serving the best interests of the Arab world. King Ghazi, who succeeded him, was a weak and erratic character. He was killed in a motor accident, and was succeeded by his infant son, Feisal II, six years of age at the time of these events. The government functioned under the regency of the uncle of this young grandson of King Feisal, the Emir Abdul Illah. The country was fertile ground for Axis intriguing, and especially for Nazi methods. For many years the head of the German organization was Dr. Grobba, the German Minister in Baghdad. In September 1939 the Regent and his government, which tried to behave correctly and loyally carry out the terms of the treaty, broke off relations with Germany, and Dr. Grobba retired to Iran.

By the time Italy intervened in the war, Axis

influence had so grown in the country that, despite British pressure, the Iraqi Government did not break off relations with Italy. The Italian legation remained in Baghdad, and has ever since been used by the German and Italian propagandists and intriguers alike. They found a ready instrument in Sayad Rashid Ali Gailini—to give him his full name—who had been intriguing for power with indifferent success for years. The Axis had had an earlier supporter in Bekr Sidky, who, with the army behind him, had staged a *coup d'état* and became Prime Minister. British influence helped Bekr Sidky's downfall, and he was afterwards murdered as a result of a vendetta. Bekr Sidky had exiled Rashid Ali to Turkey, where the latter came even more under German influence. The Germans pulled sufficient strings for Rashid Ali to return to Baghdad, supplied with ample money. Another instrument was the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem, who has been making himself a nuisance to Britain ever since the end of the last war. He and his partisans stirred up trouble on every possible occasion, murdered the notables of the pro-British section of the Palestinian Arabs whenever they considered it necessary, and were responsible for two serious armed revolts against the mandate. After the first serious trouble, ended by the exile of this prelate, the High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, now Viscount Samuel, made the mistake of allowing the Mufti back to his position of influence and patronage, including the

handling of the substantial ecclesiastical funds. When he finally fled the country he first sought refuge in Damascus and then made his way to Baghdad. This bloodthirsty scoundrel should have been hanged long ago.

Between 1 and 3 April, 1941, while the Regent was away from Baghdad, another *coup d'état* was engineered, with the support of a section of the army, and Rashid Ali seized power. The Regent fled to Palestine. A rump of the parliament and senate were assembled to appoint Rashid Prime Minister, and the trouble would seem to have begun. The *coup d'état* was the culminating act of many months of intrigue. In October 1940 the Nazi Government made a declaration to all the Arab countries promising to respect their independence in the event of a German victory. Rashid Ali was by this time chief of the Cabinet, and, to all intents and purposes, a German agent. Other Ministers were pro-Nazi. At the time of this declaration the intriguers initiated a movement to throw in the lot of Iraq with the Axis. Fortunately, the pro-British Ministers were in the majority, and, after some months of conflict, Rashid Ali and other pro-German Ministers were forced to resign at the end of January 1941. Some pro-Nazi military officers were dismissed, but the new Cabinet, under Taha el Hashmi, did not arrest Rashid or certain other notorious pro-Nazis; and they still allowed the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem freedom of action.

There have been criticisms of the British Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service, and the Intelligence Service in the Middle East, at their apparent lack of energy, or knowledge of what was going on. It is true that there have been rather too frequent changes of British Ministers in Iraq, and some of those appointed had little knowledge of the country or of the Arab world. At the time of the *coup d'état*, however, we had as British Minister Sir Kinahan Cornwallis, who had served for fourteen years as adviser to the Iraq Minister of the Interior during the mandate period. Sir Kinahan has an unrivalled knowledge of Arab politics and habits of thought, and he returned from retirement as the most suitable diplomat for this difficult post. As long before as May 1940 the British Minister in Iraq had drawn the attention of the home Government to the activity and apparent success of Axis intrigues in Iraq, and had asked for troops to be sent to the country. This was admitted in Parliament by the Prime Minister on 6 May, 1940, and the reason given for not sending the troops was that we had none to spare, all the available forces being required in Egypt. Yet in the following April, when the trouble came to a head, and we did send forces to Basra from India under the terms of the Treaty, the Rashid Government at that time made no objection. Presumably the same forces in India could have been sent in the previous May, before the trouble started. The importance of Iraq would appear to have been

overlooked in Whitehall until it was almost too late. Apart from the known German policy of *Drang Nach Osten*, the country which produces four million tons of excellent petroleum a year was not likely to be overlooked by the German General Staff or the German Secret Service. The case of Iraq is, it is to be feared, one more example of the need of far greater vigour in countering Axis intrigue and propaganda. The excuse usually made is that we cannot be expected to stoop to such methods as those employed by the Germans. While we need not copy the methods of the Gestapo nor engage in political assassination, we might apply their vigour and also supply our own propaganda machine with plenty of funds. Why, for example, should it always be the Germans or Italians who buy up the vernacular newspapers in the Middle East and elsewhere? Why, again, did we allow the Germans to steal a march on us with their Arabic broadcasts?

By the end of April 1941 the Rashid Government had thrown off its pretence of adhering to the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, despite its declarations of friendship after seizing power. The sending of further British reinforcements from India was objected to. The atmosphere in Baghdad was such that the British women and children resident there were evacuated to Basra by aeroplane. Under the Treaty certain aerodromes and other posts are maintained at the disposal of Britain. One of these, Habbaniya, was also used as a training centre. It was unfortified

and, apart from the ground staffs of the aerodrome, was guarded only by a small body of Assyrian levies. Habbaniya aerodrome, fifty miles from Baghdad, is probably the finest flying field in the whole of the Middle East. It can be used both by land planes and flying-boats. In peace time it was the Royal Air Force headquarters in Iraq and was also used as a commercial airport. Before the war, five Royal Air Force squadrons and an armoured car company were stationed at Habbaniya. These had all been withdrawn for use in Egypt and only the training school and its machines remained when the aerodrome was attacked. In the last week of April the Iraq Government began to concentrate troops and artillery on the high ground overlooking the aerodrome. Our requests, through the usual diplomatic channels, that these menacing forces should be withdrawn were answered by the dispatch of more soldiers and guns. On May 2nd the Iraq artillery opened fire on the aerodrome and the cantonment, where there were a number of British women and children besides other civilians and the ground staff. Fortunately, we had always retained another aerodrome, Shaibah, near Basra, in our hands. Royal Air Force machines from Shaibah had no great difficulty in discouraging the attack on Habbaniya, and complete the discomfiture of the hostile force by sending troops and howitzers by air to the threatened aerodrome. The Iraq Air Force, consisting of about thirty machines, was systematically

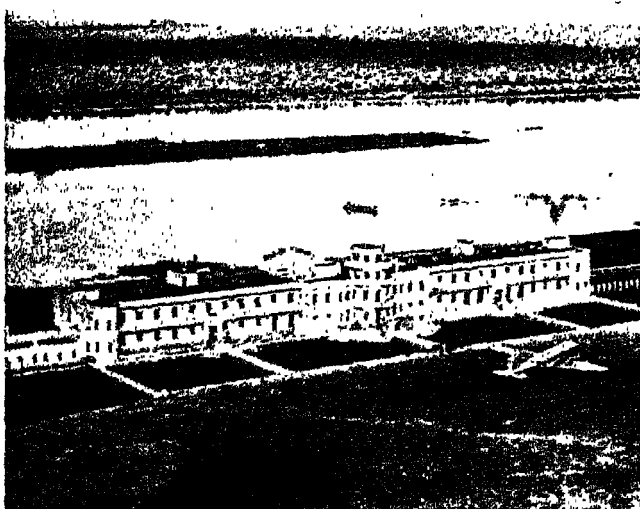


attacked, most of the machines being destroyed on the ground at the aerodrome near Baghdad. Other Iraqi forces which seized important positions on the oil pipe line and the desert fort of Rutbah on the motor track between Damascus and Baghdad were also suitably dealt with. In these operations we were aided by the Arab Legion, under British officers, from Transjordan. Thus the attack by Rashid and his adherents was beaten off for the time being. It would appear that the pro-Axis elements in Iraq acted prematurely. Something went wrong with the timetable. It is probable that the malcontents got news of the intention to send British reinforcements to Basra, the second most important town in Iraq, which lies seventy miles up the Euphrates. They also counted prematurely on German assistance. The Axis agents perhaps promised too much. The only way in which Germany could have sent help to Iraq in April and May of 1941 was by air from Greece. An intermediate landing-ground would be required, for the distance was too great for troop-carrying planes to make the journey without landing to refuel. If the Germans could have obtained control of Syria in time the important aerodromes at Aleppo and Palmyra would have served this purpose.

That the Germans and Italians had been working hard to obtain the necessary foothold in Syria, ever since the collapse of France, was well known. They had met with certain obstacles. The Vichy Govern-



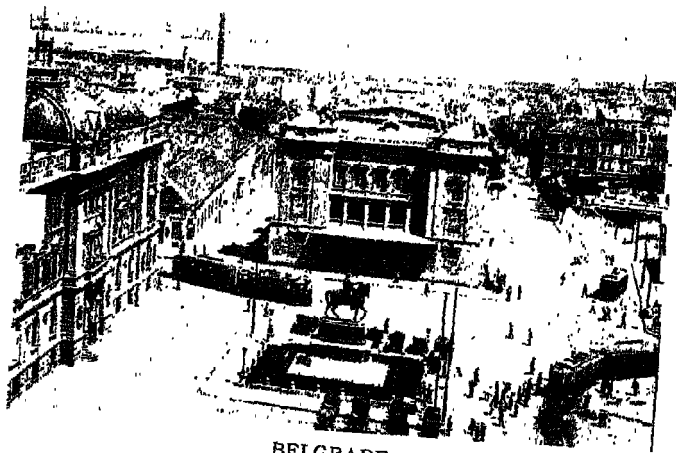
GERMAN TROOPS IN TRIPOLI



BASRAH: TERMINAL BUILDINGS, HOTEL, AND  
SEAPIANE BEACH



GREEK SOLDIERS BEING INSTRUCTED IN USE OF  
BRITISH ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN



BELGRADE

ment had always felt that to allow the Germans or Italians, or both, openly to take possession of any part of the French Empire would be the signal for revolts and further adherences to General de Gaulle in other parts of the French Empire. Secondly, in Palestine, immediately to the south, was a strong British force of all arms which could have been over the border and into Syria the moment the French mandatory government capitulated to German pressure. The remnants of General Weygand's once great army in Syria were of uncertain temper and might well have assisted this incursion from Palestine. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, the Syrians and Lebanese had been agitating for years to rid themselves of French control and set up an independent state. Many of the young Syrians had been caught in the toils of Nazi propaganda and were pro-German. The more far-sighted Syrians feared to exchange French for German control. Once the Germans and Italians were in their country they felt they would never be able to get rid of them.

German help for the Rashid Ali Government in Baghdad was not forthcoming at once. The Turks gave him no sympathy, and Ibn Saud, King of Nejd and Mecca and ruler of Saudi Arabia, the most important figure in the Arabian world, gave no encouragement either. Other Moslem leaders wholeheartedly condemned his breach of Treaty with and hostility to Britain. The Emir Abdul Illah,

who had fled first to Palestine and then to Trans-jordan, had many adherents in the country and his proclamations were scattered broadcast by British aeroplanes over Baghdad and other centres of population. The flow of petroleum by the pipeline to Haifa was interrupted but the British Mediterranean Fleet had ample stocks of the precious fluid. The Germans had succeeded in causing us embarrassment and the diversion of some forces, and they had gained some valuable experience. The next German move was not long delayed.

Despite any delays or setbacks in Iraq or elsewhere the Nazis believed they had the means with which to drive through all opposition eventually. These means were the Panzer divisions. They were not a new or secret weapon, but the logical and natural development of mechanized warfare. The existence of the Panzer, or armoured, divisions was known before the outbreak of the present war. There should have been no surprise when they came into action on the Polish front in September 1939. The truth is that the power of this organized army on wheels and tracks was underestimated, just as the power of the Luftwaffe was overestimated. The Nazi propaganda machine had exaggerated the strength and efficiency of the Luftwaffe, but had kept quiet about the Panzer divisions.

The German army had six Panzer divisions in September 1939. During the following winter this

number was increased and ten Panzer divisions were available for the campaign in the Low Countries and the Battle of France by May 1940. By April 1941 the number had been increased to twenty. The chief virtue of the Panzer division from the military point of view is its extreme mobility. It is a complete army, with an air-striking force forming an integral part of the organization. It is not retarded by brigades of marching infantrymen or slow-moving transport. There are no horses. In the chapter on the conquest of Libya by the Army of the Nile I have given the figures of the rate of advance of the German invaders in the Low Countries and Northern France and have compared the rate of advance of General O'Connor's mechanized forces favourably with these. In the reconquest of Libya the Panzer divisions averaged thirty miles a day for twelve days, and overran the province of Cyrenaica, except for the area of British resistance round Tobruk, in this period.

The core of a Panzer division is four hundred tanks of three main types. In the Polish campaign the armour of the light and medium tanks was found to be too weak and the armour was strengthened for the next main campaign. The tendency now is to discard the light tank altogether and to concentrate on medium, heavy and super tanks.

The medium tanks weigh about twenty tons, with a crew of three. They are protected by surface-hardened armour 30 millimetres thick (1.18 inches.

and mount one 37-millimetre gun (1.45 inches) and two machine-guns. The heavy tanks weigh about thirty tons, carry a crew of five and have a top speed of thirty miles an hour. Their armour is heavier and its thickness appears to vary according to the uses to which the tank is intended to be put. Thus, for mountainous country, less armour is used. The heavy tank mounts a 75-millimetre gun (3 inches) and two machine-guns. The super tank weighs up to seventy-five tons and carries a crew of eight. It is protected by 60-millimetre armour (2.36 inches) and mounts two 105-millimetre guns (4 inches) and one anti-tank gun. In addition to the usual tractor-drawn guns and howitzers the Nazis produced special heavy field guns for the Balkan campaign. These were mounted on caterpillar tracks and could fire forward, that is, without unlimbering.

The other units in a Panzer division are :

- (1) Supporting aircraft (fighters, bombers and dive-bombers), trained to co-operate closely with the ground vehicles and with a good wireless signalling system.
- (2) A brigade of infantry in lorries. These infantry are for mopping-up purposes.
- (3) A regiment of motor-cyclists.
- (4) A regiment of field artillery.
- (5) A battalion of anti-tank gunners.
- (6) A heavy machine-gun battalion.

- (7) An engineering battalion with bridging equipment.
- (8) Motorized repair shops.
- (9) Mobile anti-aircraft batteries.
- (10) Commissariat, ammunition supply, field hospital, all mechanized.

The tank brigade is organized in two regiments, each of two battalions of a hundred tanks. The quality of the tanks is not even. The best German tanks are now made at the Skoda works in Czechoslovakia. This fact should banish any lingering affection for the Munich settlement in every country outside Nazi Germany.

It is strange that the first complete Panzer divisions should have been built up and trained in Germany. The tank itself was a British secret weapon. This very development of its use was advocated by a handful of British officers for twenty years after 1918. The British Treasury, or the General and Field-Marshal Blimps, or both, turned a deaf ear. Yet with our long-service professional army, necessarily small in numbers under a voluntary system, we had the least excuse of any nation for neglecting to follow this logical development in land fighting.

The voice of General de Gaulle was another crying in the wilderness for *independent* armoured divisions. His senior colleagues in the French army were tank-minded ; but their conception of the use



of tanks was in small numbers as an adjunct to each infantry division.

In mobility, the nearest approach to the Panzer division in military history were the Tartar armies of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. These terrible conquerors were all mounted ; indeed, each Tartar soldier had four horses and rode them in turn. They used their bows on horseback. The Tartars lived on the country and, if necessary, on the milk of their mares. The Tartar hordes rode round the mediæval armies of China, Western and Southern Asia and Europe.

The comparison has also been made with the armoured knights and their armoured horses of the European age of Chivalry. It is not an exact comparison because the armies of the Middle Ages were hampered by foot soldiers. The Norman knight, who conquered all Sicily with sixty companions, apparently had the right conception of mobility.

What is the answer to the Panzer division ? To build up and create opposing armoured divisions must be a slow process. Yet the obvious answer to a regiment of tanks is another regiment of tanks. Aircraft in overwhelming strength will stop a Panzer division, especially if enough of the aircraft fire cannon. The roof of the tank is usually comparatively weak. When the Panzer divisions of General Rommel reconquered Cyrenaica we had an air superiority, but not enough of it, especially at the beginning. Deep and narrow trenches will stop

tanks, but they must be kept under fire and there must be no room for the Panzer division to get round a flank. Probably the most practicable answer is to "democratize" the anti-tank gun. We need very great numbers of mobile anti-tank guns to accompany the infantry. The French armoured cavalry, reckoned the finest Chivalry in Europe, were beaten by the English archers at Crecy, Agincourt and Poitiers. The English long-bow was a formidable weapon and the archers reached a high state of proficiency in its use. Also, the archers took the field in very large numbers. The mass discharge of their arrows beat the charging horsemen, despite the armour. Afterwards, when the use of the "villainous saltpetre" enabled cheap firearms to be placed in the hands of foot soldiers, the day of the armoured knight ended and the feudal system with it. The cavalry tradition lingered on, however, especially in the British Army; and when we did mechanize we failed to do it thoroughly enough.

Fortunately, salt water is a good anti-tank obstacle.

## CHAPTER VIII

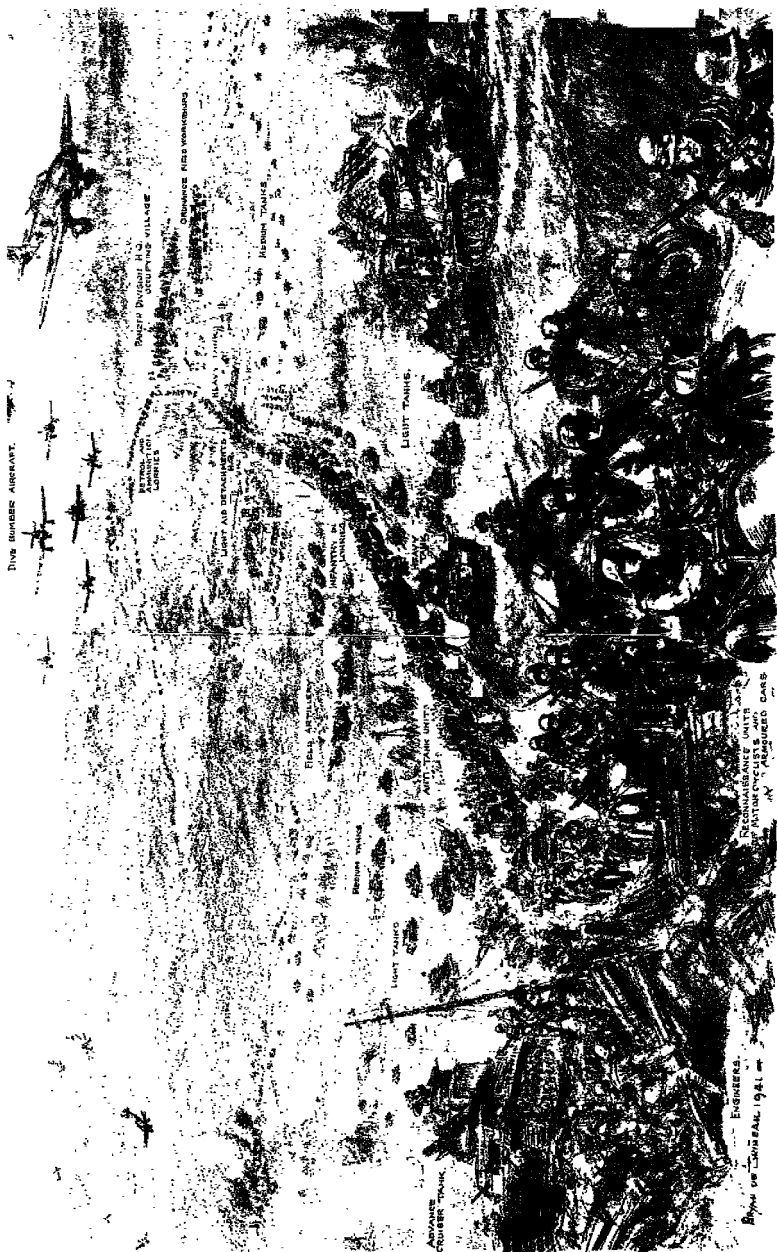
### THE CONQUEST OF THE BALKANS

GERMANY ACCOMPLISHED THE CONQUEST of the Balkan Peninsula with 1,200 aeroplanes, five Panzer divisions, and the assistance of a number of corrupt or cowardly native politicians. Fortunately, there were more honest men than Hitler had expected. Thus, in Hungary, whose co-operation was necessary for reasons of communications, Count Teleki resisted to the last, despite his local quislings, the weakness of the country, and its difficult strategical position. When all was lost he took his own life.

Bulgaria was the key to the whole military position. It was difficult for Britain to bring much counter-influence to bear, as we and the French had baulked at the task of removing some of Bulgaria's grievances. The French and ourselves were the prop and support of Roumania under King Carol for years, and, as the price of our assistance and protection, we could have insisted on the return of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria. When the Germans, always generous with other people's property, arranged for this transfer after the capitulation of Rumania, the British Cabinet sent a message to Sofia, welcoming the territorial change, and recognizing it. This was getting the worst of both worlds.



DIVE BOMBERS AIRCRAFT



Ury had permission of the "Illustrated London News."

# ADVANCE OF A PANZER DIVISION

ENGINEERS  
ADVANCE ENGINEERS  
LIGHT INFANTRY  
HEAVY INFANTRY  
RUSSIAN DIVISION IN VILLAGE  
COMMUNIST FIGHTING  
LIGHT TANKS  
HEAVY TANKS  
RUSSIAN AIR DETACHMENT  
RUSSIAN TROOPS  
RUSSIAN TROOPS  
J. M. M. 1941



At the time of the attempted re-settlement of the Balkans under the Treaty of Berlin (signed on 13 July, 1878, at the close of the Berlin Congress), an influential section of British politicians favoured giving Bulgaria an outlet to the Ægean Sea through Macedonia. The Marquis of Salisbury of the day, then in opposition, made a powerful plea in the House of Lords, with all his prestige as an ex-Foreign Secretary, for this very modification of the territorial settlement under the Treaty. Czarist Russia was then the bogey threatening the north-west frontier of India, and the integrity of the Balkan provinces of the then Turkish Empire simultaneously. Lord Salisbury's plea that if Bulgaria had direct access to the sea, we, as a naval Power, could not only the more easily develop trade with her, and all that followed from good commercial relations, but would have the means of sending direct help in case of need. This opportunity was lost, and there was another opportunity, also lost, in the post-war settlement of 1919-20. Hitler and his emissaries promised Macedonia to Bulgaria, as well as a large part of Yugoslavia, and anything else her Government wanted. He found a pliable instrument in Professor Filoff, the Prime Minister. At the end of February, the Professor made the usual pilgrimage to Berchtesgaden, and on 1 March, 1941, he signed the Axis Pact. On the next day the single Chamber of the Bulgarian Parliament was called together in special session to ratify the agreement. Despite the

activities of the German secret agents and the Gestapo, who swarmed in the country, twenty brave men out of a total of 150 deputies voted against. There was no debate, and five members who demanded one were shouted down. It would be a miracle if they lived long afterwards.

Under the agreement, Germany was given a completely free hand to send troops through the country. As an example of blatant hypocrisy, Professor Filoff's speech is worthy of attention.

The Reich Government he said, has not asked of the Bulgarian Government anything that would clash with its peaceful policy or its true obligations to its neighbours. On the contrary, the Reich Government has expressly taken into consideration the existing treaties of friendship that we have concluded with our neighbours and the declaration that we have recently signed with our neighbour, Turkey—a declaration which emphasized afresh the peaceful policy of Bulgaria. In this situation, after weighing all the circumstances and led, above all, by the wish to safeguard the vital rights of our people and country, taking into consideration the friendship existing between Bulgaria and Germany, and after receiving the assurance that the existing law and order in the country would be maintained in the highest degree, the Bulgarian Government decided to agree to the request of the Government of the German Reich. The Bulgarian Government regard it as their duty to declare that the presence of German troops in the country in no way changes the peaceful policy of Bulgaria. Bulgaria abides truly and firmly by her treaty obligations, and is determined not to depart from this peaceful policy. She is consequently determined to refrain from any attack and from any measures that



might threaten the interests of anyone. I believe that the Bulgarian Government, by making their decision, have best safeguarded Bulgaria's future, and served the cause of peace in the Balkans. The Bulgarian Government hopes that their attitude will be rightly understood by all and approved by the Balkan people.

Despite all this professed talk of peaceful intentions, the Bulgarian army attacked both Yugoslavia and Greece under the protection of the Luftwaffe and the Panzer divisions. On 5 March, 1941, Great Britain broke off diplomatic relations with Bulgaria. Mr. George Rendel, the British Minister in Sofia, accompanied by his daughter, the Legation staff, and the consuls, withdrew to Turkey under the customary diplomatic immunity. At Istanbul they were the intended victims of a typical Gestapo crime. On the principle that dead men tell no tales, a suitcase containing three powerful time-bombs was placed amongst their luggage. Much damage was done, and some casualties caused by the explosion. His Majesty's plenipotentiary escaped injury.

It was now the turn of Yugoslavia. Croatian terrorists, in Italian pay, had murdered one of the ablest monarchs of this generation, King Alexander of Yugoslavia, during his official visit to France in October 1934. These murderers were members of the notorious "Ustachi" gang, the newspaper of whose organization was published in Berlin with financial support from the Nazi Party.

Their false passports had been issued to them in Munich. This day of murder was a good day for both Nazis and Fascists. The same weapons which, incidentally, bore the trade mark of the Mauser arms factory in Germany, removed the patriotic and efficient Foreign Minister of France, M. Barthou, who had previously narrowly escaped murder by the Nazis when they bombed his train on its passage across Austria. Barthou was succeeded by Laval ; and the rise of Hitlerism encouraged the pro-German activities of a Yugoslavian Foreign Minister, Stoyadinovitch. His pro-German and pro-Italian policy, and his venality, made him the most hated man in Yugoslavia. After dismissal and imprisonment, he was finally sent to Greece, where the British authorities took him into safe custody. This was during the period between the signing of the Axis Pact by the Filoff Government in Bulgaria and the final capitulation of the Yugoslav Government under the Regent, Prince Paul, and the Prime Minister, Tsvetkovitch.

There was intense public opposition in Yugoslavia to joining the Axis, and several crises in the Cabinet. British and American diplomacy were both active in trying to prevent this betrayal. The German demands were well known and hinged on the right of passage through the southern part of the country for the purpose of attacking Greece and the demobilization of the Yugoslav army. Finally, the then Yugoslav Government was allowed

to say that no troops would be allowed through the country, though it was understood that munitions and supplies would be allowed over the railways. After many hesitations, M. Tsvetkovitch and his Foreign Minister, M. Marcovitch, left for Vienna where, with much pomp and ceremony, the Pact of adherence to the Axis as a junior partner was signed on March 25th.

This act was a signal for a great outburst of popular indignation throughout Yugoslavia and particularly amongst the Serbs. On March 27th the Army and Air Force, under the leadership of their own officers, carried through a bloodless revolution with the overwhelming support of the people of Yugoslavia. Prince Paul was allowed to leave for Athens, but the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister were arrested. The young King Peter, who should have ascended the throne in the following autumn, became King. Mobilization of the Army, which had hardly been begun by the former Government, was speeded up ; and though the new Government proclaimed its intention of pursuing peaceful relations with all Powers, including Germany, and did not repudiate the signatures of the displaced Premier and Foreign Minister, it was obvious that the Pact was a dead letter and that Yugoslav territory could not now be used for attacks on Greece. The Germans would have to fight for the right of passage.

Hitler at once ordered the German General Staff to begin immediate preparations for a simultaneous

attack on Greece and Yugoslavia instead of on Greece only. It was stated at the time that the General Staff had asked for fourteen days for a re-alignment but Hitler insisted on the attack beginning on the eleventh day. During this period German diplomats, consuls and nationals were withdrawn from the country.

At 5.30 a.m. on April 16th the German Minister in Greece, Prince Erback von Schönburg, called on M. Koritzis, the Prime Minister, at his private home and informed him that Germany considered herself at war with Greece and that German troops would enter Greek territory that morning. M. Koritzis replied that Greece would defend herself. At the same time German and Italian troops opened the attack on Yugoslavia.

Though Belgrade had been declared an open town and its anti-aircraft defences removed, the city was mercilessly bombed in broad daylight on the same day. Thousands of incendiary and high explosive bombs destroyed the greater part of the city, killing many thousands of the inhabitants. Nearly all the hospitals, churches, schools and other public buildings were deliberately destroyed in broad daylight. The Royal Palace was obliterated by thirty direct hits. Isolated houses were attacked on the outskirts, and in one of them Dr. Koulovetz, the leader of the Slovenes, was killed. Low-flying aircraft machine-gunned the fleeing people, including women and children.

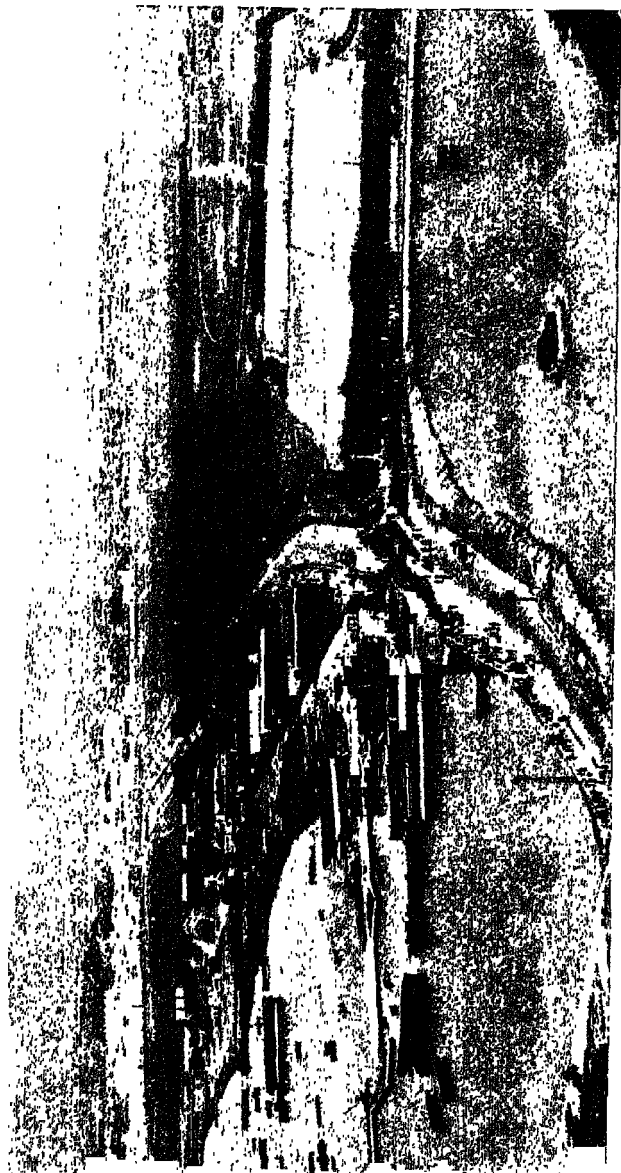
This was the worst attack on a helpless city since the bombing of Rotterdam.

Other towns and villages in Yugoslavia were mercilessly bombed at the same time ; and when it became known that the Yugoslavian Government had removed to Sarajevo, that city was practically destroyed. The Yugoslav Air Force, heavily outnumbered, offered a courageous resistance, but the odds were hopeless. Nevertheless, they accounted for some fifty of the German air raiders out of a total estimated at 300 which made the main attack on the capital. The Yugoslav Air Force totalled less than 100 machines of British, German and local manufacture. The pilots fought to the last against both the German and Italian Air Forces until only three bombers were left. Into these surviving machines 27 Yugoslavian airmen were crowded and, taking off from Mostar, in southern Yugoslavia, flew across Bulgaria and Roumania and arrived safely in Russia.

On the same night, 6 April, 1941, the Royal Air Force struck back by bombing German military concentrations in Sofia. A continual stream of troop trains and trains carrying guns, ammunition and military stores was pouring through the Bulgarian capital. The main railway station and marshalling yards, the railway junction, warehouses, motor transport shops and a large factory were heavily bombed. The crews of searchlight and anti-aircraft guns were machine-gunned. Great fires were

started, followed by many explosions, and trucks were seen to be thrown into the air. On the way back, in the early morning light, the Royal Air Force bombers dived and machine-gunned German motor transport on the roads in the Struma valley with satisfactory results. We lost no aircraft in this raid.

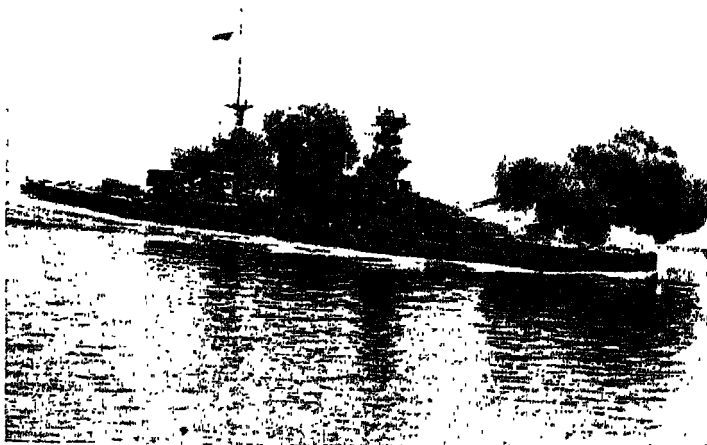
Yugoslavia was caught by the Germans in a state of partial mobilization. General Simovitch, the new Prime Minister, formerly chief of the Air Force Staff, and his colleagues, did what they could to repair the omissions of the previous Government. The Tsvetkovitch Government had, however, stationed the army on a political plan, principally with the object of suppressing disorders in Croatia. Realignments had to be taken up to meet the threat of the German forces and particularly the Panzer divisions massed in Bulgaria for the attack. Furthermore, the previous Government had steadfastly refused to have any joint Staff talks with either the Greeks or the British. There was no time in the few days that elapsed before the German assault to work out a suitable plan for mutual defence. The high military reputation of the Serbs, the numerical strength of the army, and the mountainous and difficult nature of the country misled the Greeks, in particular, into over-rating the Yugoslav powers of resistance to the German onslaught. The Yugoslav army, when fully mobilized, would consist of thirty infantry divisions, one guards division, and three cavalry or mobile divisions. About



LOOKING INTO SPAIN FROM GIBRALTAR. NEUTRAL GROUND, RACECOURSE, AND SPANISH TOWN  
OF LA LINEA



ITALIAN "TURIN" DIVISION AT BENGLIAZI



H.M.S. *BARHAM* IN ACTION



one million riflemen could be placed in the field. The infantry were well equipped except for a shortage of anti-tank weapons. Most of the field guns and howitzers dated from the last war. The greatest weakness was the lack of tanks and armoured cars. Two of the three cavalry divisions were in process of conversion to mobile or mechanized divisions, but there had been difficulty in obtaining the necessary armoured fighting vehicles.

Before the military revolution in Yugoslavia the Greeks had covered their frontier with Yugoslavia and had there concentrated some of their best divisions to prevent a German incursion through Yugoslavia by way of the Vardar valley directed on Salonika, or, alternatively, by way of Monastir towards the Greek town of Florina, just south of the frontier. Here is the Monastir gap, the recognized invasion route into Macedonia and Greece for aggressors from the north. The generally mountainous frontier is here broken by a flat tract of country, 15 miles wide, enclosed between mountain ranges averaging 4,000 feet in height. Passing across this plain is a single track normal gauge railway which is the main line to Salonika from the north ; and a road. Relying on the defence of these routes by the Yugoslavs, the Greek General Staff moved most of its troops eastward to the frontier with Bulgaria. Only Greek mountain guards were left on the Yugoslav frontier. Further east the danger area was the Struma valley, passing by way

of the Rupel Pass into Greek territory. Also relying on the defensive powers of the Yugoslavs, the Greeks failed to retreat in southern Albania and, as we shall presently see, their army facing the Italians was cut off by a German thrust across the Pindus mountains.

The opening stages of the campaign found both the Greeks and Yugoslavs determined to resist the massed might of Germany to the end. On the day the German declaration of war was presented, His Majesty King George of Greece issued the following proclamation to his people :

Greeks, a new enemy this morning insulted the honour of our country. With no warning, at the same moment as the German Government handed the Greek Government a document simply announcing their action, German troops attacked our frontiers. Our heroic army, watchful guardian of the sacred soil of our country, is already defending it with its blood.

The Greek people, who have proved to the world that they rank honour above everything else, will defend it against this new enemy to the end. Attacked to-day by yet another empire, Greece, so small, is at the same time so great that she will allow no one to touch her.

Our struggle will be hard and without mercy. We shall not be afraid. We shall bear all our sufferings, and shall not shrink from any sacrifice, but victory is waiting for us at the end of the road to crown Greece once again, and for all time.

We have at our side all-powerful allies, the British Empire, with its indomitable will, and the United States of America, with their inexhaustible resources. On the battlefield we are fighting side by side with our Yugoslav

brothers, who are shedding their blood with us for the salvation of the whole Balkan Peninsula and of humanity.

We shall win with the help of God and the benediction of the Holy Virgin ; yes, we shall win. The history of the nations will once again have to write that the country renowned for Marathon and Salamis does not waver, does not submit, does not surrender.

All together, Greeks, men, women and children, stand erect, clench your fists, and be at my side, the defenders of the Greek Motherland, of yesterday, of to-day, and of to-morrow, worthy of your ancestors, an example to your descendants, defenders of the freedom which has sprung from the sacred bones of the Greeks.

Forward, children of Hellas, for the supreme struggle—for your altars and your hearths.

Stout hearts and the will to resist were not sufficient defence against the highly developed military technique of the Panzer divisions described in the previous chapter. Preceded by their dive-bombers, which pounded every village, every entrenched position, gun emplacement and fort, two German armoured divisions with 800 tanks, mechanized artillery and swarms of motor-cyclists swept through Southern Yugoslavia separating the units of the Serbian army and paralysing their communications. Troop-carrying planes, literally in hundreds, dropped parachutists, armed with machine-guns, in the rear of the Yugoslav troops. Other parachutists alighted on the top of the forts and hurled hand-grenades through the casements. The mechanized vehicles used by the Germans in these operations had been

specially designed for fighting in mountainous country and the bravest of soldiers, armed with rifles, machine-guns and light artillery, were almost helpless before them. Repeating the tactics used at Sedan in the previous May during the Battle of France, a German armoured division had penetrated to the lower Vardar valley by April 8th. On the same day they occupied Doiran, a Serbian town near the Greek frontier, thus turning the flank of the Greek forces holding the Struma valley. It was obvious that Salonika could not be held, and it fell twenty-four hours later. In the interval everything possible was done to destroy the power station, harbour works, military stores and anything else that could be of value to the enemy. Shipping was removed, carrying a considerable portion of the remaining civil population. This collapse of the Yugoslav army in southern Serbia was particularly tragic in view of the fine performance of the western Greek army of the Epirus in Albania, and of the eastern Greek army in Macedonia.

During these fateful days between April 6th and 9th the Greeks on the Albanian front were carrying out successful attacks on the Italians, capturing two important fortified positions and 540 prisoners. The lines of communication of this army of the Epirus were now threatened, and its difficult retreat in the face of Italian pressure began.

In the east, the German attack, launched with the same ferocity and weight of metal as against the

Yugoslavs, was held up. The northern frontiers of Greece from Corfu on the west to the frontier of Turkish Thrace in the east are 450 miles long. It was obvious that the narrow strip of territory along the Ægean Sea comprising Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace could not be held, even with British assistance. It was, therefore, decided to evacuate the eastern part of this territory between the Turkish frontier and the Nestos river. The evacuation of the civil population had been begun a month earlier. Garrisons of volunteers held two small forts, Echinós guarding the approaches to Xanthé, and the fort of Nymfeá north of the small town of Comotini. These little garrisons of heroes held out successfully for seven days. The territory along the Bulgarian frontier west of this evacuation area had been strongly fortified by General Metaxas. The main German attack down the Struma valley was held up completely for two days. The chief defence rested on four forts—Rupel, Ussita, Lissi and Perithori. All attacks on the first two forts, despite the lavish use of tanks and dive-bombers, were completely repulsed and Lissi was held to the end. The Germans, at the cost of great sacrifices, penetrated into the Perithori fort and reached the subterranean galleries. There they were counter-attacked by the Greeks, all the Germans were killed and the whole of the fort reoccupied. This was on April 7th, after forty-eight hours' heavy fighting. On the next day this fort was again captured by the Germans and immedi-

ately recaptured by the Greeks. Hundreds of German parachutists were dropped on these forts and all were killed or captured. Such was the resistance offered by the Greeks in Macedonia before their flank was turned by the armoured divisions debouching from the Vardar valley.

On April 9th, the advancing Germans clashed with the British and Imperial forces. On April 13th German troops entered ruined Belgrade. By April 20th, a fortnight after the German attack, organized resistance in Yugoslavia was at an end. Yugoslav troops continued to resist in the mountains and others succeeded in crossing into Greek territory, where they fought bravely with the British and Greek armies.

Some 60,000 British and Imperial troops had been sent to Greece. Of these, 15,000 were Australian and New Zealanders. The artillery and mobile units, including the tanks and armoured cars were British. It is not true, as stated by Dr. Goebbels in the German propaganda, that the Anzacs formed the bulk of the force and that the fighting was left to them. The Governments in Australia and New Zealand had been kept fully informed of what was to be done and had approved each step. This combined force was commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, G.B.E., K.C.B., D.S.O., under the direction of General Papagos, Commander-in-Chief of the Greek Army. The Anzacs were under the command of

Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Blamey, afterwards made Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, to General Wavell.

Why were so few British troops sent? The Germans sent forty divisions to the Balkans, including five Panzer divisions, for the campaign. A large Italian army was in the field in Albania, possibly 250,000 men, and more Italian troops were available north of Yugoslavia. The Bulgarians and Hungarians sent troops also to attack Yugoslavia and Greece. The Greek Army of the Epirus had been fighting for six months and the troops were becoming exhausted. If it was right strategy to send an army, it should have been much larger.

The principal answer was shortage of shipping. By this time we had lost over 5,000,000 tons of British, allied and neutral shipping serving our cause. In addition, many ships had been damaged. (*A complete list of shipping losses up to the end of April 1941 is given in the Appendix.*) The convoy system means delay. Routeing, to avoid enemy attack, means longer voyages. Most of our troopships and supply ships had to be routed round the Cape of Good Hope from England. The counter-attack by the Germans in Libya and the threat to Egypt had to be met and there was a proper reluctance to risk losing Egypt and the Suez Canal. It was hoped to form a united front between Yugoslavia and Greece much earlier. Better preparations and a sounder joint plan could then have been made.

The Tsvetkovitch Government in Belgrade frustrated this. It was hoped, also, to induce the Turks to give active help in the field. The Turkish point of view was that they would be taking unjustified risks in leaving their own fortified lines in Thrace and that they had been informed that all available British help had already been sent to Greece. If the campaign had gone better from our point of view, and if the threat in Libya had not developed so unexpectedly, we would have continued to reinforce General Wilson's army. The inefficient British Intelligence Service, which failed to get news of the German diversion in North Africa, also failed to get accurate information of the strength of the German forces in the Balkans. This fighting strength was underestimated, and not for the first time.

I have drawn attention to our inefficient Intelligence in other connections. The gathering of political, economic and military information is not an affair of beautiful blonde spies or picturesque gentlemen adventurers. It is a business of gathering information through very many channels and by various and different methods. This information then has to be checked and counter-checked, pieced together and corrected. The necessary organization cannot be hastily improvised. It requires literally years of careful building up and the expenditure of much money. It is the work of specialists. The idea seems to prevail in some British quarters that any retired or incapacitated regimental officer, for



whom other work is not available, can be pitchforked into the Intelligence Service. Another idea seems to be that the service is suitable for young men, with influential relatives, who find ordinary warfare too rough a game. The Secret Service proper has not been starved of money in recent years, as is shown by the Parliamentary Estimates. It has had more money than in the years before the last war. Yet in the war of 1914-18 both military and naval Intelligence were excellent, and contributed greatly to our ultimate victory. Acting on the information we had, would it not have been possible to supply the Greeks with more equipment between October 1940 and April 1941? The Greeks mobilized twenty divisions; they were lightly equipped and were short of anti-tank guns, anti-aircraft guns and lorries. Seven more Greek divisions were in reserve and could have been sent to the front if more equipment had been available. It is fair to presume that if Greece had been given *half* the equipment *we* lost in the Balkans, the Italians would have been driven into the sea. But for an unusually early fall of snow on the mountains of Albania the Italians would have lost Valona in any case.

Again, could not more heavy bombing squadrons have been sent to attack the ports of Durazzo and Valona? These are not well equipped harbours and the Italians had great difficulty in keeping up their supplies for the Albanian front in any case. It may

be argued that the Germans would have moved sooner if their Italian armies were *in extremis*. This argument is not valid. The Germans advanced as soon as their careful preparations were complete and the passes were negotiable. And why, when it was known that the Germans meant to invade Greece and we had decided to land a British and Imperial army, did we not send more fighter aeroplanes? The course of the whole campaign would have been altered in our favour by the addition of 100 Hurricanes. There was a shortage of aerodromes in Greece, it is true; but they could have been enlarged and added to with an effort. In the event, the situation was retrieved by the gallantry of the Greek troops, especially in Macedonia, the superb fighting qualities of the British soldiers and their Australasian comrades, excellent staff work and the ready resource of the Royal Navy.

The British and Imperial forces, with two Greek divisions, all under General Wilson's command, had dug themselves in on a strong natural defence line running from the sea near Katerini through Veria and Edessa to the Yugoslav frontier. The length of this front was sixty miles. In Albania the Greeks were holding a front of sixty to seventy miles, some forty miles beyond their frontiers. Between these two armies were the Yugoslav forces holding the mountains and the Monastir gap. To the east of General Wilson's lines the British armoured force was preparing demolitions.

When, on April 7th, news came through of the defeat of the southern Serbian army and the consequent threat to the Monastir gap, a force was organized under General McKay to take up positions near Amintaion, south of Florina, and there to await the German onslaught. This force consisted of an Australian brigade (less one battalion), a machine-gun battalion, an artillery regiment, an anti-tank regiment, and some medium artillery. This force made the first British contact with the Germans in the Balkans during the present war. The armoured force was ordered to blow its demolition charges and retire behind the Australian Division holding the Edessa section of the line. On April 9th and 10th the leading German Panzer division attacked General McKay's force. The battle raged furiously for forty-eight hours, the Germans advancing with complete disregard of casualties and suffering heavily. As more and more German troops and artillery arrived, it became obvious that the enemy must prevail through sheer weight of metal and numbers. If the Germans could not be held at Amintaion the whole line was in danger of being outflanked. On April 11th the Imperial and Greek forces began a withdrawal to a new line which ran from the sea south-east of Mount Olympus to a position north-west of Servia, a town on the main road from Florina to Larissa. From there the line followed the Aliakmon river south-westwards and finally north-west again along the hilly ground to the west of the plain of Kozani.

General McKay's force, which had suffered considerable losses, withdrew down the Kozani valley to behind the new line.

British and Imperial troops held this line from the sea to Servia and along the Aliakmon river. The hilly ground along the Kozani plain was held by the two Greek divisions. These Greek divisions bore the brunt of the next German attack. They were heavily outnumbered, suffered severely, and were eventually overwhelmed and broken up. This disaster forced the next withdrawal of our forces, as their rear was threatened. There followed a series of rearguard actions by the Anzac soldiers and the armoured force which will for ever stand high in the military annals of the British Empire.

To cover the retreat of the British centre, the British armoured force was sent forward to engage the advancing enemy tanks. The two armoured forces met north of Ptolemais between Florina and Kozani on April 13th. A fierce battle was fought between 100 British tanks and 150 German tanks. The action began at dawn with our light tanks taking up position along a ridge to cover our retreating infantry. This line was three miles long and was attacked by 150 German tanks, mostly of the heavy and medium type. As our light tanks fell back, the cruiser tanks came into action and battle was fairly joined. It began with a series of engagements between groups of opposing tanks. The German heavy tanks withstood our fire fairly well,

but the medium tanks were destroyed in large numbers. Most of the surviving German medium tanks retired altogether from the fight. By skilful manœuvring, the German heavies, about thirty in number, were shepherded towards a wood where our own anti-tank batteries were in ambush. The German tanks, trundling down the woodland paths, suddenly came under the fire of our anti-tank guns at close range. Twenty-six German heavies were destroyed in this trap. The battle lasted all day and by evening our forces were masters of the field of battle. Our armoured force had fought the heart or core of a Panzer division on fairly even terms and had shown its superiority in men, material and tactics. Altogether fifty German tanks were destroyed. Our losses were only two tanks destroyed and a few damaged. The next day our armoured force had to continue the retreat in conformity with the general movement of withdrawal. This fighting retreat lasted nine days and carried out forces across bad mountain roads, turned into quagmires by the rains, and through the plain of Larissa. The retreating British and Greek forces were subjected to almost continual dive-bombing attacks and were hard pressed by German motor-cyclists, armoured troop carriers and lorry-borne infantry. Rearguard actions were fought daily, sometimes twice a day. After the battle of the 13th the enemy tanks were shy of coming within range ; but our artillery took heavy toll of the pursuers whenever they could reach

them. In one action a battery of the Royal Horse Artillery caught the advancing German infantry pressing on after the retiring Australian rearguard which had been holding a ridge of high ground at Amintaion. The Germans were advancing in solid masses along a narrow road and came in sight of the gunners at a mile range. The guns opened rapid fire and could not miss. The German soldiers were mown down in swathes until they broke and fled.

The nights were bitterly cold and added to the hardships of this terrible retreat in face of an enemy ten times more numerous and with all the advantages of air reconnaissance and an air-striking force.

Once the Panzer divisions were in the plain of Larissa our enemy had a great advantage. By this time, also, the growing air strength of the Luftwaffe and its repeated attacks on our few aerodromes and landing-grounds were making themselves felt. After the first week of fighting the enemy had a working command of the air. The dive-bombers now appeared in force, concentrating their attacks on the few roads and the only railway available for our use. Our transport, 100 miles behind the front, was continuously bombed.

The six days' retreat from the Mount Olympus line to the new line south of Lauria and including the pass of Thermopylae was accomplished under great and increasing difficulties. On April 14th an Australian brigade was sent to Kalabaka, the rail-head of the railway line running to that town from

the port of Volo. Its duty was to cover our left flank during the retreat. On April 15th a New Zealand brigade took up a similar covering position some forty miles on their right north of Ternavos on the main road to Larissa. These two brigades held on long enough for our left and centre to disengage. On the right a particularly fine rearguard action was fought in the Peneios gorge, south of Mount Olympus. The eastern entrance was originally held by a small New Zealand force. It was heavily engaged by a vastly superior enemy force and driven back on April 15th. Still holding their ground in new positions, the survivors were reinforced on the 16th by two Australian battalions. This small Anzac force then held fast against the attacks of two German divisions until ordered to withdraw.

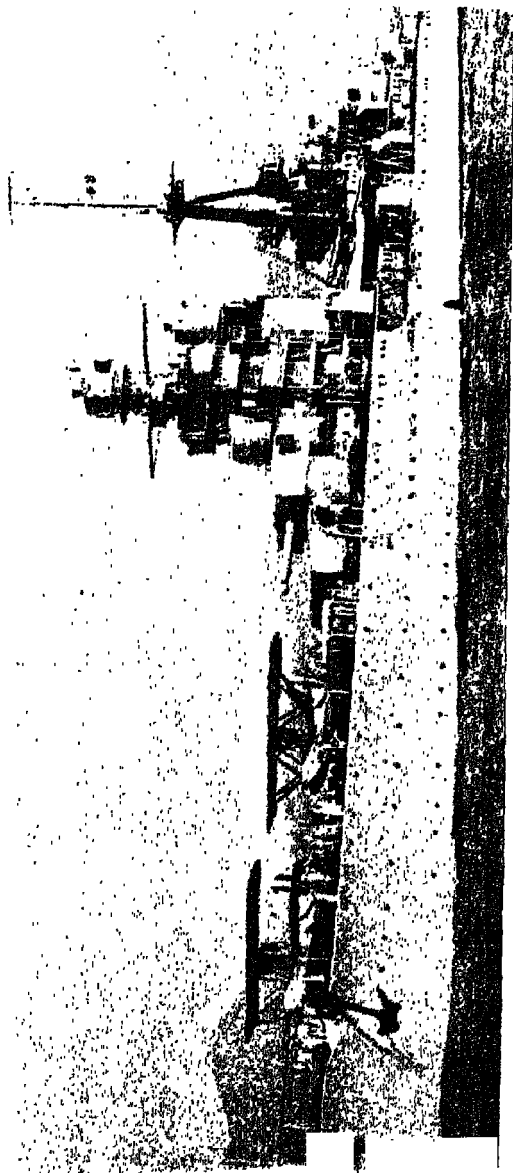
The main attacks on our rearguards were made by five German divisions. Owing to the difficult road conditions, made worse by our care in blowing up every bridge and blocking every tunnel behind us, the Germans had to push their infantry columns on in advance of their armoured fighting vehicles and artillery. The dive-bombers took the place of the enemy field guns. Small artillery pieces and howitzers were landed for the support of the German infantry by plane. In the mountains the enemy benefited much from their specialist Alpine troops. Except on the north-west frontier of India the British army has not had much need of mountain troops, and we felt the lack of them both in Norway

and Greece. Nevertheless, the Anzacs, many of them veterans of the Libyan desert campaign, adapted themselves to mountain warfare with success. In particular, they manhandled their artillery over the mountains. This artillery wrought havoc on the advancing German infantry. A battery of Australian field guns did ten times as much damage as a squadron of dive-bombers. One battalion of the rearguard on the west flank was cut off in the retreat. They were making for Larissa, when they found the Germans had got there first. The battalion turned about and marched back along the Peneios river, turned southwards and climbed a 2,000-foot mountain. This battalion rejoined its division on the new line.

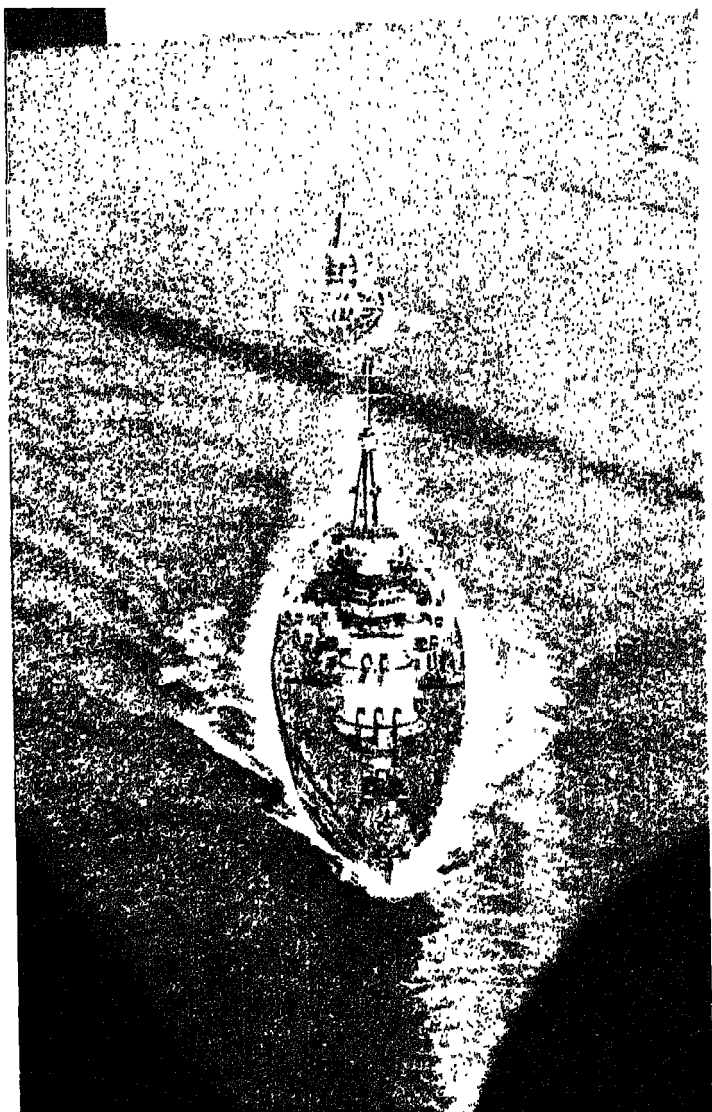
By April 20th the main body of the British and Imperial forces were on the new line with their right flank on the Pass of Thermopylae and the sea. Our forces, after this fortnight of heavy fighting and continual withdrawal, were in good spirits, physically tired, but ready to fight on. After the first few days of the Battle of Greece our men knew their task was hopeless. The German armies were too numerous, the enemy air force in overwhelming strength. Yet they retired in good order, fighting rearguard actions, saving their artillery and equipment, and never losing heart. The Germans were superior in numbers and inferior in all else.

During this long, bloody and painful retreat, the main body of the Greek army withdrawing south





ITALIAN CRUISER ZARA



ITALIAN BATTLESHIPS *CONTE DI CA'OUR* AND  
*GIULIO CESARE*

from the Albanian front was on the west of the Pindus range of mountains which runs south and south-eastwards flanking the Larissa plain. This army of the Epirus, of fifteen divisions, had skilfully disengaged itself from the Italian armies in Albania and was making an orderly retreat to the southwards. The main road south runs through Yanina west of the Pindus range. The Italians were not pressing hard, and whenever they tried to come to close quarters were punished and driven back. Part of the German forces which, after defeating the Yugoslavs burst through the Monastir gap, turned right-handed and crossed the Pindus range by the Metzovo pass, which rises to a height of 7,530 feet, and on April 20th, Yanina fell to this force and the Greeks found themselves cut off. Greatly exhausted after half a year's campaigning in the mountains, the Greeks had reached the end of their wonderful stamina. The main failure, however, was on the part of the Higher Command. Without consulting their Government, the Greek Generals decided to capitulate. Negotiations were accordingly opened with the German command. On 21 April, 1941, the Greek Government addressed the following note to the British Government :

The Greek Government, while expressing to the British Government and to the gallant Imperial troops their gratitude for the aid which they have extended to Greece in her defence against the unjust aggressor, are obliged to make the following statements :

After having conducted for more than six months a victorious struggle against strongly superior enemy forces, the Greek army has now reached a state of exhaustion, and, moreover, finds itself completely deprived of certain resources indispensable for the pursuit of war, such as munitions, motorized vehicles, and aeroplanes—resources with which it was, in any case, inadequately supplied from the outbreak of hostilities.

This state of things makes it impossible for the Greeks to continue the struggle with any chance of success, and deprives them of all hope of being able to lend some assistance to their valiant allies. At the same time, in view of the importance of preserving the British contingents, in view of the limited aviation at their disposal, and in view of the extent of the front heroically defended by them, the Imperial forces have an absolute need for the assistance of the Greek army, without which they could not prolong their own resistance for more than a few days.

In these conditions the continuation of the struggle, while incapable of producing any useful effect, would have no other result than to bring about the collapse of the Greek army, and bloodshed useless to the Allied forces. Consequently, the Royal Government is obliged to state that further sacrifice of the British Expeditionary Force would be in vain, and that its withdrawal in time seems to be rendered necessary by circumstances and by interests common to the struggle.

The Thermopylae line now became a covering position for the re-embarkation of the British and Imperial forces. On April 23rd the army of the Epirus laid down its arms. The King of Greece and his Government withdrew to Crete to continue the struggle. His Majesty King George of the Hellenes

announced this withdrawal in the following proclamation :

The cruel destiny of war to-day compels us, we and the heir to the throne, as well as the lawful Government, to leave Athens and transfer the capital to Crete, whence we shall be able to continue the struggle that the will of the entire nation and the duty to defend the country's independence and territorial integrity laid upon us after the unprovoked attack that we suffered from two empires.

Our will, and that of the Greek Government and people, as already affirmed in manifold fashion, called for the resistance to the end of the Greek forces, which, in spite of the unequal nature of the struggle, particularly after the invasion of our soil by the Germans, have fiercely opposed the enemy with the support of the British forces which came to our aid, and which fought so brilliantly and are still fighting on Greek soil for a just cause.

Though exhausted after six months of victorious and hard fighting against a much stronger enemy, our troops, who have written the most glorious pages of our military history, continued the struggle against the German offensive with unheard-of heroism.

We still do not know the real reasons why the army of the Epirus signed an armistice with the enemy without our knowledge and without the cognisance of the General Commander-in-Chief and the Government.

The signature in no way binds the free will of the nation, the King and the Government, which is manifested in the continuation of the struggle with all the forces remaining to us to safeguard our national interests.

With this aim in view we are compelled to go to Crete. We are leaving in order to be able freely and from free Greek territory to continue the struggle against the

invaders until a final victory is achieved that shall repay us fully for the nation's great sacrifices.

Greeks, do not lose heart even in this sad hour of our history. I shall be always among you. The justice of our cause and God himself will help us by every means to win final victory, despite the trials, the mourning, and the dangers suffered in common, and that until that hour we still have to suffer.

Remain faithful to the idea of one country, united, indivisible, and free; fortify your will, oppose your Hellenic pride to the pressure of the enemy and his deceitful artifices, have courage, and better days will return. Long live the nation!

There had been dissensions in the Greek Cabinet. Though Government and people were united against the hated and despised Fascists there were pro-German quislings in high places. These included some ministers, provincial governors and senior officers of the army. Others became defeatist as the fortunes of war turned against their country. On 18 April, 1941, there was a stormy meeting of the Greek Cabinet. M. Koritzis left it and called on the King. He told his Sovereign he had failed in his task, kissed his hand and begged to be excused as he had private matters to attend to. The broken-hearted statesman went to his home and shot himself.

M. Koritzis was replaced by M. Tsouderos as Prime Minister. On assuming office on April 23rd, he issued the following message to the Greek people:

We are defending ourselves against an unjust aggression of unprecedented baseness. To save a cowardly partner

that we had vanquished an empire of 100,000,000 souls has struck us in the back. From these trials which a hard struggle has imposed on our race, and which all free peoples of the earth look upon with disgust, we shall emerge victorious—a glorified and greater nation.

The military armistice signed with Germany without any authorization appears to be a precipitate act which may be put down to fatigue brought about by six months' unequal but victorious struggle, and which is the result of overwhelming pressure brought to bear by the enemy on our valorous army. Hold firm—by doing so we shall increase the moral gains of the country through which a new and great Greece will arise.

When the German army, followed by the Gestapo, finally overran the whole Greek peninsula, the quislings came out of their holes and formed a puppet government. The leaders of these traitors were two university professors, Logothetopoulos and Luvaris, long known for their Nazi sympathies, and two generals, Tsolakogly and Demestichas. There had been no visible fifth column in Greece until defeat stared all men in the face. Then the Nazis found their traitors. There is a lesson here for the British people. If we give the benefit of the doubt to highly placed or wealthy personages who have shown past sympathy for Nazism or manifest present defeatist tendencies and do not put them out of harm's way, we shall rue our misplaced leniency if ever the tide of battle sets strongly against us.

As in other countries invaded by the Nazi hordes, the common people were blameless. The peasants

and shepherds evacuating the threatened districts in the north and east burnt their own farms and cottages rather than leave them to the enemy. The Greek people cheered our soldiers and pelted them with flowers when they first landed and proceeded up country. The same kindly, simple people cheered our soldiers and pelted them with flowers when they were in retreat and leaving the soil of Greece to the mercy of the conquerors. Greek fishermen and the crews of small coasting craft braved the bombs and machine-gun bullets of the German aeroplanes to ferry parties of British and Anzac soldiers cut off from their units to the comparative safety of the islands. We owe a great debt to the Greek people. We will repay it.

These fine people have suffered cruelly from air bombing. The important town of Larissa, damaged by earthquake and subsequently bombed by the Italians, was bombed still further by the Germans, who killed over a thousand civilians. Trikkala was completely destroyed and two thousand people slaughtered out of a population of eighteen thousand. Yanina was heavily attacked and the hospitals destroyed. Nearly all the harbours and particularly the Piraeus, the port of Athens, Patras and Corinth were mercilessly bombed. This bombing was indiscriminate and not only aimed at quays, docks and piers. The civilian populations suffered severely at all these sea-ports.

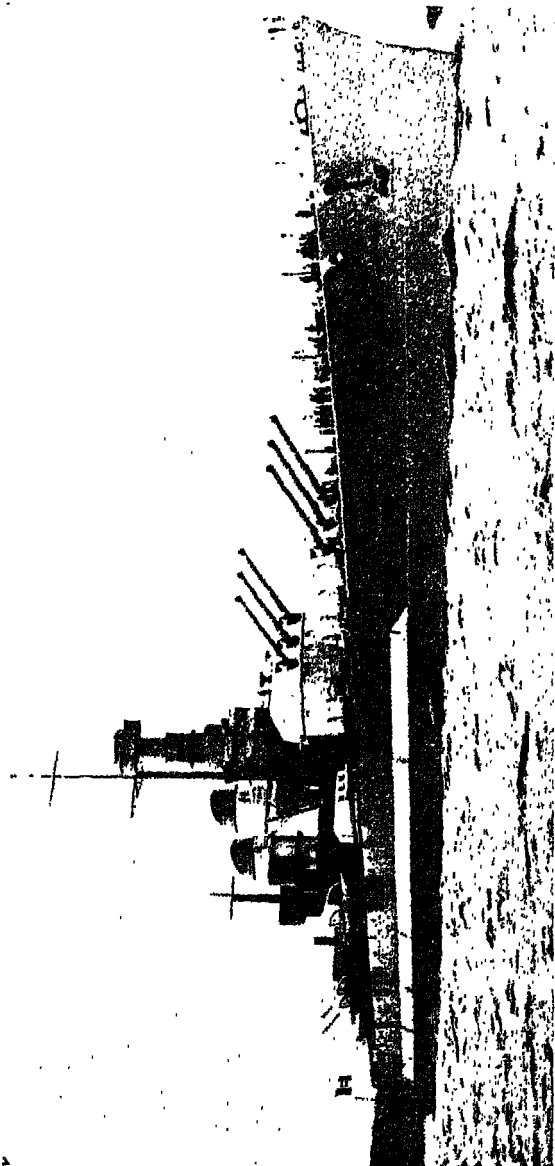
The receipt of the Note from the Greek Govern-



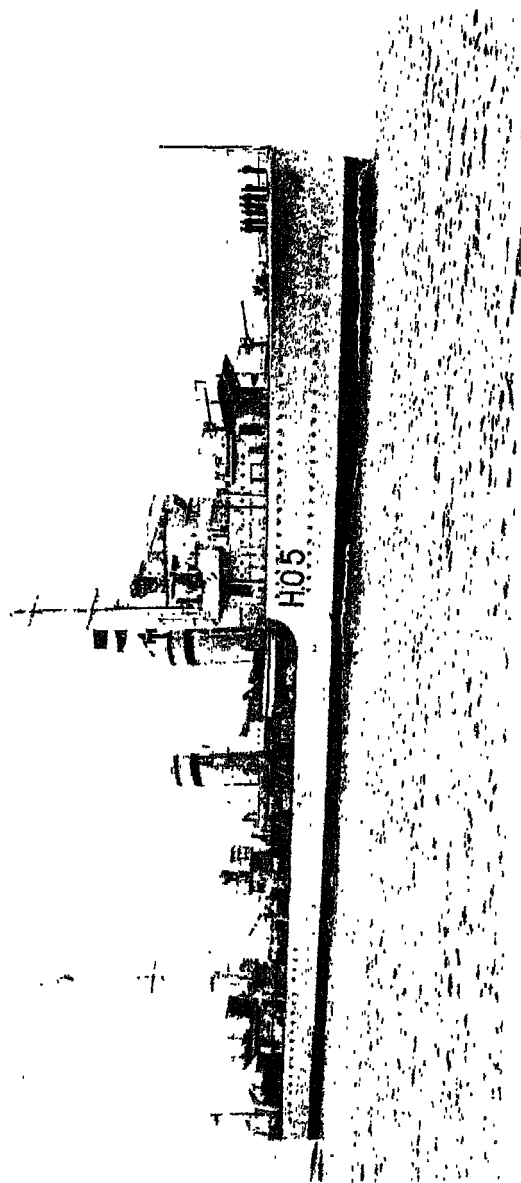
ment referred to above necessitated a complete recasting of our strategical plans. Under better conditions, it should have been possible to maintain resistance in the southern part of Greece, the Morea, which is almost cut off from the northern part by the Gulf of Corinth. The narrow isthmus which joins Attica to the Morea (or Peloponnesus), the Isthmus of Corinth, is itself cut by a canal with high banks and navigable by fairly large ships. The Gulf of Corinth is from ten to forty miles wide, and navigable by large vessels. After the surrounding of the army of Epirus operating west of the Pindus mountains, light German forces, mostly motor-cyclists, pursued the usual tactics of pushing on ahead in all directions. Some of these reached the north shore of the Gulf of Corinth and occupied various coastal towns and villages. This advance was not serious. Warships operating in the Gulf of Corinth could have prevented any serious crossing, except by air-borne troops, while the Isthmus could have been held with comparatively small forces. With the Greek army out of the war for the time being, any such plan was out of the question. There was nothing for Generals Wilson and Blamey to do but to withdraw their troops and get as many of them and as much of their equipment away as possible. It was Dunkirk over again. The difficulties of this evacuation were greater than from Dunkirk because we had no great force of fighter aeroplanes available and no cloud of small vessels and boats to

take off our soldiers. Also the voyage to Crete, for example, was much longer than that across the English Channel. At the time of the cessation of effective Greek resistance in the field, the British and Imperial troops were holding the Thermopylae position and resisting enemy attacks. It had been intended to withdraw most of our forces from the Piraeus, the port of Athens. Concentrated and repeated air attacks practically destroyed this port and most of the shipping in it, and withdrawal had to be made from smaller ports and open beaches. This last stage of the withdrawal occupied a week and was unexpectedly successful in view of all the circumstances. Except for some parties of stragglers, the bulk of our forces were afloat by April 30th. 48,000 out of 60,000 soldiers were safely evacuated with their rifles and most of their machine-guns.

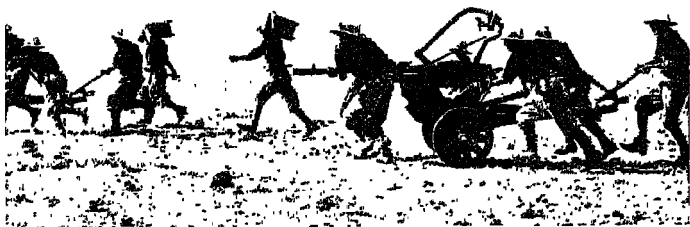
What I may call the Thermopylae line stretched from the pass between the mountains and the sea, across the mountain group to the westward, the most important peak of which, Mount Parnassus, is 8,000 feet high, and then southwards to Delphi on the Gulf of Corinth. This was a strong line and could hold for some time. It could only serve as a rear-guard position. On 22 April, 1941, a New Zealand brigade withdrew to a position south of Erythrai to cover the withdrawal of the main force to Athens, the Piraeus and the Peloponnesus. As soon as this brigade had dug in, the withdrawal began from the Thermopylae line and was completed on April 25th.



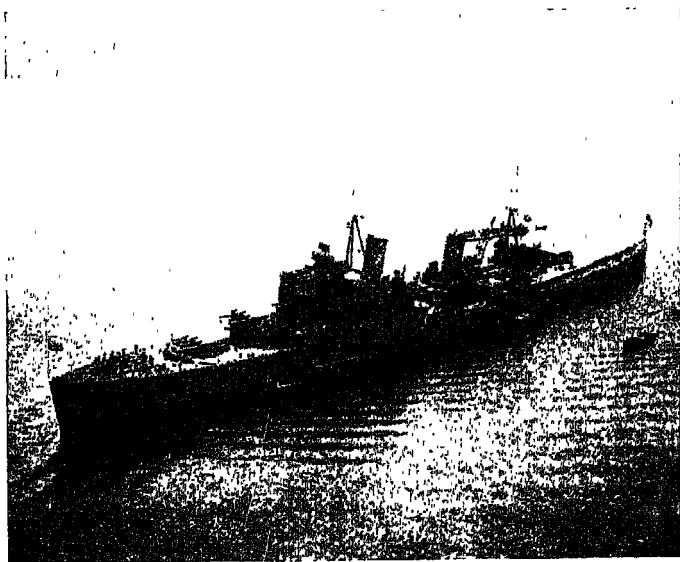
ITALIAN BATTLESHIP OF THE *LITTORIO* CLASS



H.M.S. GREYHOUND



ITALIANS BRINGING UP AN ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN



H.M.S. SOUTHAMPTON



H.M.S. *Ajax*

The Germans had high hopes of destroying or capturing the bulk of our forces. The 80-mile-long strip of territory to Athens lies between the Gulf of Corinth to the south and the Atlante channel between the island of Euboea and the mainland to the north-east; and is mountainous country 40 miles wide. Every road and track was subjected to a murderous bombing by aircraft operating from landing grounds in Thessaly only 50 or 100 miles away. On land, ever-increasing forces of German tanks, armoured cars, mechanized artillery, troop-carrying lorries and motor-cyclists pressed hard on our retreating army. A large force of parachute troops, estimated at 2,000, was landed on the Isthmus of Corinth behind our forces and captured the bridge over the canal. To extricate 80 per cent of our forces under such conditions was almost a miracle. It was made possible by the indomitable spirit of our physically exhausted men. If their morale had broken there would have been a *débâcle*. It did not break. The conditions were far more punishing than the retreat of the British army from Mons in 1914 or Sir John Moore's famous withdrawal to Corunna in the Peninsula War.

The heroes of Flanders and Portugal were spared the horrors of continuous air bombing and machine-gunning by swarms of aeroplanes operating with practically no air opposition.

Our men fought three major battles in five days, and, as the main German reinforcements came up,

were outnumbered by ten to one. The infantry sent forward in masses against our machine-gun posts were mostly Austrians. In his ridiculous story of German casualties in the Balkans, Herr Hitler apparently did not count the Austrian dead and wounded. The same New Zealand brigade fought the last great rearguard action in the pass between Thebes and Athens with the armoured brigade which had fought and beaten the German tanks at Ptolemais holding the right down to the sea. This force held off the Germans, despite terrific bombardment from the air, until the main body had crossed over the Corinth Canal and into the Peloponnesus. The attack by the parachutists was made too late; except that when the New Zealanders finally retreated they found the air-borne enemy troops holding the Isthmus and the beach at Megara. The New Zealanders therefore returned to Athens, and, after further fighting with marauding bands of German tanks, embarked from the two small ports of Rafina and Rafyti, with the crews of the armoured fighting vehicles. The tanks, lorries, guns, and everything else of value to the enemy, were destroyed. These embarkations and those at Nauplia, Kalamata and other small ports in the Peloponnesus were carried out at night. During the day the troops and their vehicles lay hidden in olive groves and woods, continually sought for by German aircraft. Five hundred men were killed by air attack at sea after re-embarkation. Three thousand men were cut



off trying to reach the beaches, and captured by the enemy. Throughout these operations of withdrawal all possible assistance was given by the Greek officials, military, police, civil population and by fishermen, longshoremen and the crews of small coasting vessels. After the Kalamata area had been occupied by the enemy on April 29th, the Greek country people hid 500 of our troops and helped them to be rescued at night in small parties by British destroyers using ships' boats to take the soldiers off from the open beaches. The evacuation was successful beyond all expectations, thanks to this help given by the Greeks, to the excellent work of General Wilson's staff and to the co-operation established between our land and sea forces. In the rapidly changing conditions, with the enemy pushing forward to reach all possible embarkation areas before we could evacuate, plans had to be changed almost hourly. On the nights of April 24th and 25th, 13,500 men were embarked from the Rapthis and Nauplia areas. On the next night 5,500 men were withdrawn from the Megara area, despite the bombing and sinking of a transport vessel, fortunately before the troops were aboard. On the night of April 26-27, over 8,000 more men were embarked from the Kalamata area ; over 4,000 from Nauplia ; and 3,500 from the Raphina and Rapthis areas. While troops were being withdrawn from Nauplia a transport full of our soldiers was bombed and set on fire. The destroyer *Diamond* (Lieutenant-Commander P. A. Cartwright,

R.N.) went to the rescue and saved 600 of the men under heavy and continuous air attack. The *Diamond* was then joined by the destroyer *Wryneck* (Commander R. H. D. Lane, R.N.), and both warships returned to Nauplia to search for further survivors. H.M.S. *Wryneck* rescued another 100 soldiers and both destroyers then left Nauplia. Next morning both warships were sunk by dive-bombers with heavy loss of life. The seamen and soldiers swimming in the sea or clinging to overcrowded ships' boats were repeatedly machine-gunned by the German airmen. These two destroyers were the only warships lost in the operations. Four transports were sunk, but only one had troops on board. During the night of April 27th-28th, 4,200 more soldiers were withdrawn from Raphis by men-of-war. This was the last large-scale embarkation possible. On the next two nights our destroyers were only able to rescue 235 stragglers from various beaches. By midnight on April 30th more than 45,000 British and Imperial troops and Royal Air Force personnel had been evacuated from Greece. In addition, large numbers of refugees and Yugoslav soldiers had been taken off. 185,000 tons of British and allied (including Greek) shipping was lost in all, chiefly by bombing attack while the vessels were in harbour. At the end of the operations the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean issued the following message :

I wish to convey my appreciation and admiration of their work to the masters, officers and men of the Merchant

Navy and of all the allied merchant vessels who took part in the movement of the Imperial Forces into Greece, and in the recent operations when they were withdrawn. Throughout these operations under conditions of considerable danger and difficulty there was no faltering, and the determined way in which ships fought back against the aircraft attacks with their defensive armament was magnificent. We of the Royal Navy and the officers and men of the Imperial Forces realize the extent of the service rendered and of the debt owed to the Merchant Navy for their devoted work during these past weeks.

From April 20th it had been obvious to all concerned, including the enemy, that our forces in Greece would have to withdraw. The operations would necessitate the dispersal of our naval strength in the Eastern Mediterranean to various points on the coast of Greece to embark troops and to escort convoys. These conditions, which lasted for twelve days or more, presented a great opportunity for Italian naval raiders operating from the Adriatic ports or Taranto. Apparently no Italian naval officer had the enterprise to seize this opportunity. No naval opposition of any kind came from the Italian enemy. The Germans were bolder. At dawn on April 25th German troops landed on the island of Lemnos, near the entrance to the Dardanelles. We had received warning of this move, for on April 20th German forces operating from Kavalla had invaded and occupied the Greek island of Samothrace, some forty miles to the north of Lemnos. In the island of Lemnos is the excellent landlocked harbour of

Mudros. Lemnos dominates the Dardanelles and its strategical importance is very great. Only a small Greek garrison of soldiers was stationed in Lemnos. These soldiers and the police fought heroically for four hours before being overcome. German merchant ships from Roumanian Black Sea ports, with cargoes of motor-boats, had been allowed by the Turks to pass through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and with these motor-boats Lemnos and other islands were attacked. To leave Lemnos so lightly defended was inexcusable. If we did not receive news of the passage of the German ships through the Straits and of their cargoes, our Intelligence Service in Turkey must have been more than usually negligent or inefficient. If we were taken by surprise early steps should have been taken to turn the Germans out before they had time to dig themselves in. Worse was to follow. The Germans were allowed to occupy Mytilene, with its first-class harbour ; and Chios, commanding the approaches to the important Turkish city and port of Smyrna. With the Italians in Rhodes, and the other Dodecanese Islands, the enemy now had stepping-stones down the coast of Asia Minor towards Crete and Egypt. The enemy was also allowed to occupy the Cyclades Islands, south-east of Attica. The conclusion that there was here a lack of strategical planning on the part of the British High Command and War Cabinet is inescapable.

Why was the enemy able to develop such devastat-

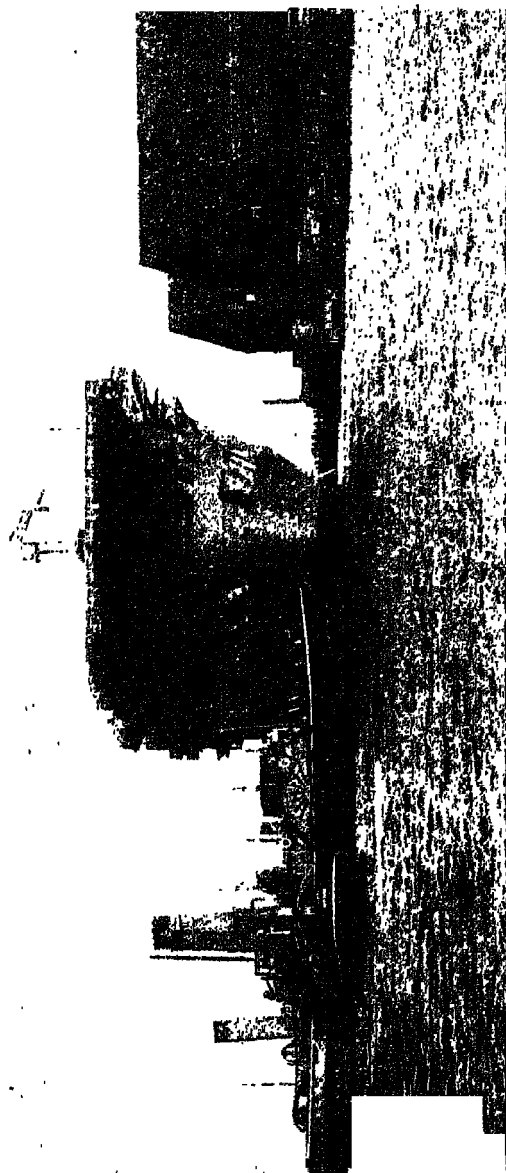
ing superiority in the numbers of aircraft flown in the Balkans campaign ? The chief reason was geographical. When we first went to the aid of Greece with aircraft in October 1940 there was only one serviceable aerodrome in southern Greece. By the time the Germans intervened the available aerodromes had been increased to three and we had prepared a number of extemporary landing grounds. These aerodromes and landing grounds could not accommodate a force of anywhere near the strength of either the Italian or German air forces employed.

The Greek Government, for fear of provoking the Germans, denied us the use of the several good aerodromes in Macedonia and Thrace, especially in the Salonika region. As the Germans advanced these aerodromes came into their hands. The Germans also had the use of all the Bulgarian and Roumanian aerodromes ; and, as already described, had been working on their improvement for months before the campaign opened in April 1941. As the Greeks and British withdrew, following on the defeat of the Yugoslav southern armies, more flying grounds had to be evacuated by the Royal Air Force and fell to the enemy. With their numerical superiority due to the possession of many more aerodromes and flying grounds than we had, the Germans were now able to attack our few remaining air stations systematically from the air. Thus the German advantage in the air progressively increased. During the closing stages of this evacuation the R.A.F. was

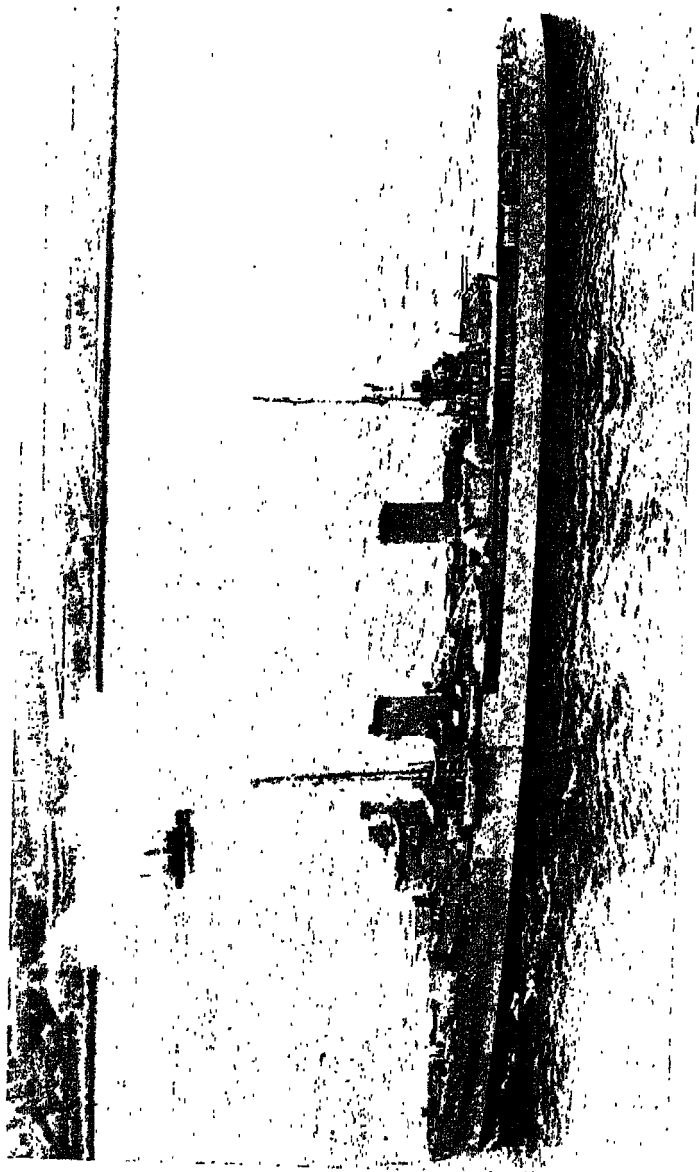
outnumbered by twenty to one. Nevertheless, in the last great air battle over Athens, at the end of the campaign, we won a victory, shooting down twenty German aircraft.

Despite all these difficulties, the performance of the Royal Air Force was highly creditable. The first bomber squadrons to arrive in Greece in October 1940 had spent six months in strenuous fighting over the African deserts. Their first bombing raid was carried out six days after the Italian aggression. During the winter of 1940-41 continual operations were undertaken under particularly trying weather conditions. The first British fighter squadron arrived early in November. This squadron was equipped with Gladiators, good machines, but obsolescent in design. On the day of its arrival, this squadron shot down eight Italian machines, and damaged a number of others, and destroyed over a hundred German and Italian aircraft before leaving Greece. On 28 February, 1941, a small squadron of Gladiators shot down twenty-eight Italian aircraft in Albania. In all, some three hundred enemy aircraft were definitely destroyed in the air, in addition to those damaged in the air and on the ground.

The Royal Air Force played a noble part in the evacuation. The few fighters had the vital task of guarding the convoys of troopships against air attack. The bombers and flying-boats were used to evacuate R.A.F. personnel and troops. Some



H.M.S. ARK ROYAL



CRUISER *PERTH*, ROYAL AUSTRALIAN NAVY



thousands of men and women were flown away from Greece and the Gestapo. One Sunderland flying-boat carried a record load of seventy-two persons besides the crew, and in this condition, fought off an enemy attack.

The young King Peter and the civilian members of his Government had been evacuated from Yugoslavia by Sunderland flying-boat. In the confusion of the retreat, the British Minister, Mr. Ronald Campbell, the staff of the legation, and certain other British subjects with the diplomatic party, became separated from the Court. Large bodies of Yugoslavian troops were holding out in the mountains, including the Dalmatian Alps, and along the shores of the Adriatic Sea. A report was received that the British Minister and his party had reached the Dalmatian port of Cattaro, and it was decided to send His Majesty's submarine *Regent*, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander P. J. H. Bartlett, R.N., to evacuate them. It was believed that the port was still in friendly hands. At dawn on 26 April, 1941, the submarine arrived off Cattaro, to find that the whole area was in the possession of the Italian army. Nevertheless, the submarine flying the White Ensign, boldly steamed into the port on the surface, and anchored. A British officer was landed to visit the senior Italian naval officer present. This whole proceeding was so unexpected that the Italians did nothing in the way of hostile action, and our naval officer was allowed to go in

search of the British Minister and his party. An Italian army staff officer was sent on board H.M.S. *Regent* during this proceeding as a hostage. The British submarine lay there for nine hours unmolested while the search went on for the British diplomats. By this time somebody in authority in the Italian Command began to appreciate the situation. Two Italian dive-bombers appeared, aimed several bombs at the submarine—which missed—and then attacked with machine-guns, wounding the commanding officer, the first lieutenant, and a petty officer in the vessel. It was time to be off, and the *Regent* slipped her moorings, dived, and left the harbour submerged, negotiating two minefields near the entrance on the way out. She returned to the Fleet with the Italian officer hostage still on board. Mr. Campbell and his party actually arrived at the Albanian port of Durazzo on April 25th with two members of the Greek Legation, a party numbering ninety-one. The Italian authorities gave them facilities to leave, and flew Mr. Campbell and his staff to Rome. From there they proceeded by air to Lisbon.

The whole of the Balkans, with the exception of Turkish Thrace, was now under Axis control.

The most reliable estimate of the German casualties, including Austrians, is 87,000 in Greece, to which must be added the not inconsiderable casualties in Yugoslavia.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE SECOND LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

WHEN, ON 26 MARCH, 1941, A GERMAN Panzer division recaptured El Agheila, near the western border of the conquered province of Cyrenaica, the military position was ugly. The enemy had achieved a strategical surprise. It was the fruit of long and careful preparation.

No doubt, the German High Command had hopes of driving right through to Egypt and the Suez Canal. Though nearly all the province of Cyrenaica was retaken, the situation was restored by the energetic and bold action of General Wavell. The British forces in Libya withdrew to Tobruk with some loss in men and material, including two thousand prisoners taken by the enemy. Of these prisoners about half were fighting troops, the remainder belonging to administrative and other non-combatant units. Tobruk was gained by the main British force, equivalent to about a division, and successful resistance there organized. Reinforcements were rushed to Tobruk by sea and to Mersa Matruh by land and air.

The Royal Air Force struck hard at the enemy's lines of communication, supply ports, including

ports which fell into his hands, marching columns, and aerodromes. The Royal Navy bombarded Benghazi, Tripoli, and the other harbours from the sea, and interrupted the passage of convoys from Italy to North Africa. After the first rush, in which the German armoured and mobile forces, aided by air-borne troops, reached the Egyptian border in twelve days, further enemy advances were held up for the next six weeks. Tobruk, strongly held, threatened the German-Italian flank. Despite the loss of valuable aerodromes in Libya, the Royal Air Force, the Australian Air Force, and, later, the South African Air Force, established the same ascendancy over the Luftwaffe as they had over the Regia Aeronautica.

Thus valuable time was gained.

It was urgently needed. If General Rommel's mobile forces could have continued their dash across the seventy-five miles of sand wastes and plateau between the Libyan border and Mersa Matruh they would have found that position only lightly held. The tank traps, dugouts, trenches, and redoubts, prepared while we anticipated Marshal Graziani's thrust, had been allowed to fill with sand, and it took some weeks to clear them and make the position fit for defence. And Mersa Matruh, as we have already seen, is at the head of a railway and a good road all the way to Alexandria. The laboratory theorists in Berlin, apparently, also worked out a grandiose plan for striking through the southern

deserts of Libya, by way of the Siwa oasis, against Upper Egypt, and even further south against the Sudan. This might be accomplished with air-borne troops. They could only carry light equipment. Whether a thrust by mobile ground forces by these routes eventuates, time will show. In the meantime the threat by the orthodox route along the coast was serious enough.

If the surviving Italian Fleet—probably two battleships and half a dozen fast cruisers, with destroyers—had been as bold as General Rommel, the situation might have been more difficult still. Fortunately, air forces can move quickly from prepared bases and aerodromes, and we had sufficient aeroplanes available to take rapid counter-action.

Tripoli was heavily bombed on the night of March 28th–29th, and again on the six following nights. Much damage was done to the docks, piers, and shipping in the port. On April 2nd heavy daylight raids were made on the main aerodromes in Tripolitania, and German motor transport bombed and heavily damaged on the roads. Such was the persistence of these air attacks on ground transport that the Germans began to move only at night. During the night of April 5th–6th the enemy motor transports were heavily bombed on the coast road near El Agheila.

As our forces fell back towards Tobruk the Royal Air Force and the Australian Air Force covered the

retreat, attacking the advancing enemy and bombing his lines of communication. Whenever we withdrew from an aerodrome and the Germans tried to use it, their planes were attacked on the ground. During the second week's operations one Australian fighter squadron shot down eighteen German aircraft. Altogether, thirty enemy aircraft were shot down or destroyed on the ground during this week's operations, despite severe sandstorms. Fourteen German dive-bombers, which ventured out unescorted by fighters, were all shot down. The ground strafing of the moving columns was particularly effective. One Royal Air Force pilot who raided a German motorized column in the Bitolj area, said on returning, "The weather was pretty bad, and I was forced to fly very low. We found the column all right, and, as the bombs burst, tanks overturned and caught fire. The chaps started running like mad, and we easily recognized the Germans by their pudding-basin tin hats. We were so low that the blast from our bombs threw the aircraft all over the place. The column was in great confusion. We machine-gunned them after bombing, and a lot stopped running for good."

The squadron-leader who led another raid said, "It was jolly good having a target as obvious as a moving column. When we arrived it stopped at once, and the soldiers darted for the ditches, but before they got far the centre of the column was on

fire. Tanks and lorries overturned and blazed furiously."

On April 11th, to cite a typical attack, one hundred vehicles of a motor transport column were destroyed on the Tobruk-Gazala road by a combined onslaught of bomber and fighter aircraft.

On April 12th the first of five determined but unsuccessful attacks in force were made by the enemy on Tobruk. Before this first attack a number of enemy tanks were caught lining up to go into battle, and were dispersed, suffering heavy damage and losses by air attack alone. In the siege of Tobruk our aircraft were able to keep the skies comparatively clear of enemy aircraft. Thus, on April 14th, the enemy air raids on the fortress were beaten off, the Germans losing fifteen Junkers 87's and three other aircraft. On that night Tripoli was again heavily raided.

These enterprising and sustained operations from the air, at a time when the critical stage of the campaign in the Balkans had been reached, made up to some extent for the lack of British troops in the Western Desert. All attempts by General Rommel, his Panzer divisions, and his Italian auxiliaries, failed to encircle any considerable portion of the British forces, and the onrush into Egypt was checked. Nor was the Royal Navy too occupied with the Balkan campaign to give assistance to its hard-pressed comrades on shore in Africa. Early in April a successful submarine attack was made on

a convoy of heavily laden troop transports and supply ships sailing from Italy to Tripoli. One large troopship of 12,000 tons was hit by two torpedoes, and a supply ship of about 6,000 tons also torpedoed. On the night of April 15th four British destroyers, the *Jervis*, *Janus*, *Nubian* and *Mohawk*, on patrol in the Sicilian Channel, sighted a convoy of five transports escorted by three Italian destroyers in the Sicilian Channel, bound for North Africa. The Italian warships were the *Luca Tarigo*, 1,628 tons, a destroyer of the "Folgore" class of 1,220 tons, and a destroyer of the "Vega" class of 652 tons. The action which followed took place near Kerkenah Bank, thirty miles east of Tripoli. Our ships sighted the enemy when they were about five miles away, faintly illuminated in the beams of a rising moon, and closed in before opening fire. In thirty minutes the victory was complete. The "Folgore"-class destroyer, heavily on fire, was beached on Kerkenah Bank. The other two Italian warships had been sunk, and three transports had gone to the bottom. A fourth was beached. The fifth transport, laden with ammunition, was hit by a torpedo, and blew up with a terrific explosion. The Italian warships returned the fire at first, but scored no hits with shells on our destroyers. Two torpedoes from the *Luca Tarigo* found their mark on the *Mohawk*, sinking her. The *Jervis* rescued most of the *Mohawk's* crew, including the captain (Commander J. W. M. Eaton, R.N.). Besides the ammunition



ship, the sunken transports were laden with motor transports and had a number of German officers on board.

During the land assaults on Tobruk naval units kept the enemy lines of communication under heavy shell fire, and made the El Gazala aerodrome, to the west of the fortress, unusable by the enemy.

On April 16th the Royal Navy carried out a heavy bombardment of Fort Capuzzo. Here the enemy had concentrated about a hundred tanks and motor transport vehicles. These were practically all destroyed by shell fire from the sea. On the same day the aerodrome at El Gazala was heavily shelled by our warships. Four days later His Majesty's submarine *Tetrarch* (Lieutenant-Commander R. M. T. Peacock, R.N.), torpedoed and sank a deeply laden Italian oil tanker on the way to Tripoli. On April 30th a large body of enemy troops were observed to be near the El Gazala aerodrome and within range of the sea. Before they could disperse they were fiercely shelled by our warships.

On May 2nd a large force of Royal Air Force bombers, concentrated for the purpose, attacked a convoy of enemy transports and supply ships escorted by destroyers, which had been located by air reconnaissance. Direct hits were made on two destroyers and three transports of 12,000 tons, 8,000 tons, and 4,000 tons respectively.

When Derna was evacuated in face of the enemy it was not possible to destroy all the military stores in the place, and a large ammunition dump fell into German hands. On the night of April 19th-20th a body of specially selected troops was landed on the coast near the town. Carrying demolition materials they divided into three parties. One party surprised the guard on an important bridge on the coast road, crossing a gorge, and blew it up. The second party carried a coastal battery by assault and destroyed four heavy guns. The third party blew up the ammunition dump and set fire to another dump of military stores. All these adventurers, with the exception of sixty captured by the Italians, were safely re-embarked.

On April 21st a naval squadron, including battle-ships, closed in on Tripoli at dawn and fired 530 tons of shells into the harbour and on selected targets in the town. The government offices, main railway station, and the military stores depot were destroyed. Much damage was done to the moles and unloading quays, and the naval headquarters were hit several times. Three transports in the naval basin were hit and set on fire, and one was seen to sink. Another transport lying outside the harbour and a destroyer were left burning furiously. Several other ships in the harbour were hit, and salvos of fifteen-inch shells struck the power station. The town and port were left hidden by great clouds of smoke and dust. The shore batteries opened fire

on the bombarding vessels, but scored no hits, and our squadron suffered neither damage nor casualties. During the approach our naval Fulmar aircraft had an unexpected opportunity. They encountered five Junkers 52 troop-carrying aircraft and shot four of them down in flames. Attempts were made by enemy aircraft to attack our warships on their way home. Six enemy bombers were destroyed in these attacks, and others damaged. Prior to the bombardment and before daybreak, Royal Air Force bombers had raided the town and harbour from Egypt. This combined bombardment was probably the heaviest any place has suffered in the course of the present war. The bombarding warships included the battle-cruiser *Renown* of the Western Mediterranean squadron, and the escorting aircraft were flown from the aircraft-carrier *Ark Royal*. Benghazi was repeatedly shelled from the sea between May 6th and 12th. On the night of May 9th a British squadron of lighter vessels closed in on Benghazi and carried out an intensive bombardment from point blank range on the port, shipping, and other objectives. Enemy counter-action took the form of fire from shore batteries and attacks by dive-bombers. No hits were scored on our ships. On the way to Benghazi two enemy supply ships were intercepted making for the port. Both were destroyed ; one of them, a large ammunition ship, was blown up. The harassing of the enemy in Libya, and especially the continual air attacks, apparently hampered the

German general plan of campaign. Their commissariat broke down, and by the time General Rommel's Panzer divisions reached the Egyptian border there were signs of demoralization. Numbers of German soldiers gave themselves up with their vehicles. The men were in the last stages of exhaustion from the extreme heat, fatigue, and lack of food and water. In many cases these Nazi fanatics were completely unnerved and wept pitifully. When the Germans operate without air superiority and suffer the consequences, they do not show the same qualities of stamina as our own troops have shown under even more difficult conditions. Sollum marked the limits of the Germans' first attempt to invade Egypt. In less than a month the little town and port, the important "Hell Fire" (Halfaya) Pass leading to it and Musaid, had been reoccupied by our advance forces. Fort Capuzzo was taken and retaken several times until it was reduced to a mass of ruins. This was only a local offensive by limited British forces. Yet heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy, and 550 prisoners, mostly Germans, with tanks and guns, were captured. It showed that we had the forces ready and able to take the initiative ; and something else was demonstrated. In this fighting in the middle days of the month of May, in great heat and with frequent sandstorms, the German troops put up a poorer fight than their Italian comrades. Indeed, the Italians in North Africa were beginning to complain that they could not

trust their German confederates to stand fast when attacked. The fighting qualities of the Nazi "African Corps" were less than was expected. Probably the unfamiliar conditions, unexpected hardships, and continual air attack wore down these picked Nazi troops.

Little help was given to the ground forces of General Rommel by the Italian and German air forces. Night raids were made on the Suez Canal area ; in the day fighting the skies were comparatively clear of enemy aircraft. The Royal Air Force, on the other hand, kept the ports of Benghazi and Tripoli under almost nightly attack, and, in the daytime, very nearly stopped German and Italian road traffic altogether. The Fleet Air Arm maintained its offensive against convoys at sea, and on the night of May 12th-13th blew up another ammunition ship and sank the Italian destroyer escorting it.

During April and May the Germans were subjected to continual harassing tactics by our desert patrols. General Rommel's theories, his hot-house trained troops, and his scientifically designed sand vehicles all broke down. It takes years to make real desert soldiers, and they must learn their trade in the desert. The heavily armoured tanks were out-maneuvred by our more mobile columns. We operated against them with armoured cars, motorized infantry, and mechanized anti-tank guns and field guns. The German tanks soon began to fail under conditions of extreme heat, soft sand, and blinding

dust storms. A new vehicle now began to make its appearance on the enemy side. This was a heavy eight-wheeled armoured car, mounting a gun.

On May 12th the first serious attempt was made by the Germans to advance towards Mersa Matruh and the main British defences. It was composed of five columns, and made a five-pronged thrust east and south out into the desert from the Libyan border. As soon as opposition was encountered all five columns turned about and retreated, offering a perfect target for air attack. The Royal Air Force took full advantage of their local command of the air.

After this failure, the initiative passed to the Army of the Nile, for the time being, at any rate.

The cause of civilization owes much to the defenders of Tobruk. Though they could be reinforced and revictualled from the sea, they were outnumbered at first, and had to stand the brunt of many attacks. Altogether, in the first three weeks of the siege the Germans and their Italian auxiliaries launched twelve assaults on the defences, five of them being very heavy. The town and harbour of Tobruk had been well fortified by the Italians. I have described its capture by the British and Anzac forces on 22 January, 1941, in a previous chapter. The area is enclosed by a semicircle of defence works, twenty-five miles in length from coast to coast. These works consist of stone forts, concrete dugouts, and machine-gun nests. In the strongest

attack, from April 30th to May 2nd, these outer defences were penetrated in the south-western section. The enemy was checked by a counter-offensive launched on the night of March 3rd-4th, 3,000 prisoners being taken, and a number of thirty-ton tanks destroyed. New defence works were thrown up to close the breach, and at no time did the enemy come near the inner defence line.

Inside the outer defences is broken country ten miles in depth, then the inner defences, consisting of ten strong forts defended by anti-tank ditches and stone and concrete heavy gun emplacements. Tobruk is thus a modern fortress with defence in depth. Against it has been thrown every devilish device of Nazi and Fascist ingenuity, including flame throwers. The defence of Tobruk was entrusted to General Leslie James Morshed. In 1914 he was a schoolmaster, and at the age of twenty-five joined the Australian Expeditionary Force as a subaltern. Two years later he was a lieutenant-colonel in command of the 23rd Battalion, which, under his leadership, won great fame in March 1918 at the battle of Messines. He ended the war with the Distinguished Service Order, six Mentions in Dispatches, the Legion of Honour, and the Companionship of St. Michael and St. George ; and became a shipping agent in Sydney. The arts of peace have not rusted his military talents.

Tobruk could hardly have been held unless the defenders were aided and succoured by a navy

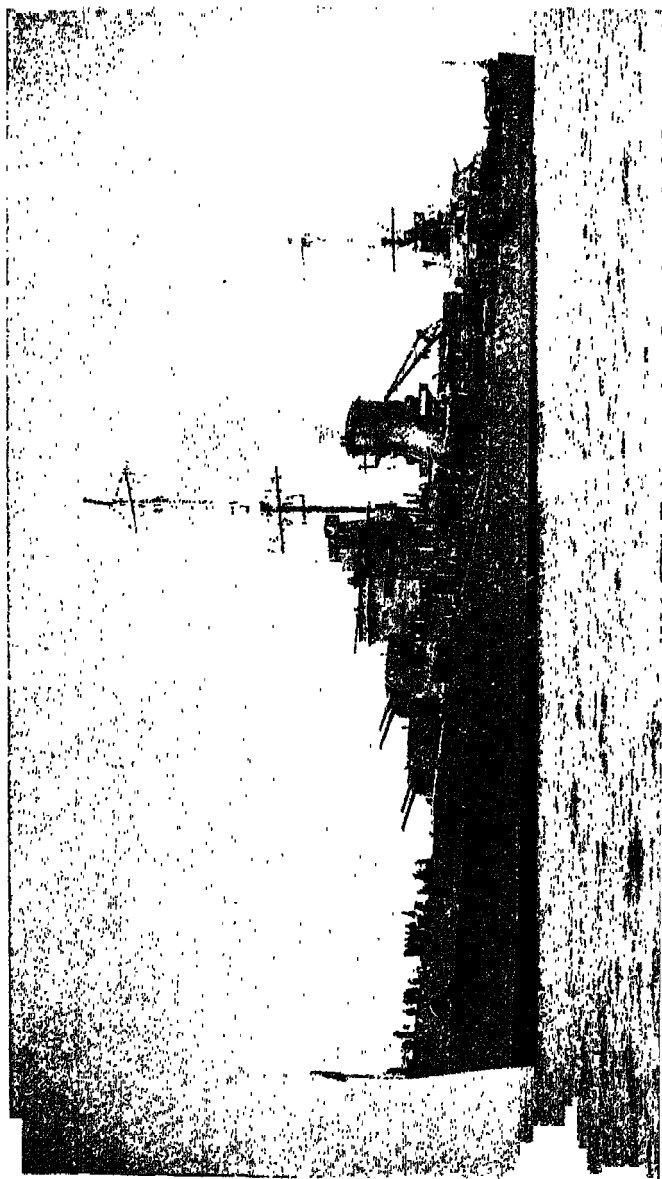
commanding the sea. I have described above some of the major naval operations, including the repeated bombardments of Benghazi, between May 6th and 12th. During this period important convoys were safely escorted through the dangerous Sicilian Channel. Though the remnant of the Italian Fleet was quiescent, the enemy sought to interfere with the sea operations by concentrated air attacks. They were the most determined assaults on the Fleet since the air battle in the Sicilian Channel on 10 January, 1941, described earlier in this book. Both the Eastern and Western squadrons were attacked in force by torpedo bomber aircraft, by high-level bombers, escorted by fighters, and by dive-bombers escorted by fighters. In one case a formation of twenty-five dive-bombers escorted by Messerschmitt 110's was intercepted, broken up, and driven off by fighters of the Fleet Air Arm before the attack could be pressed home. None of our ships suffered any damage in either the day or night attacks. The following losses were inflicted on the enemy during the heaviest attacks, which continued throughout the afternoon and evening of May 8th :

3 torpedo-carrying aircraft 1 S.79	} destroyed by anti-air- craft fire.
2 torpedo-carrying aircraft	
	} damaged by anti-air- craft fire.
1 Junkers 87 2 S.79's	} destroyed by naval fighters.





OIL STORAGE TANKS AT HAIFA



H.M.S. ORION

1 Junkers 87	} severely damaged by naval fighters.
1 Messerschmitt 11	
1 CR.42	

During the whole period May 6th–12th sixteen enemy aircraft were shot down, and six damaged severely.

I take the liberty here of reproducing by permission an eye-witness account of the attacks on the Western squadron given by the Exchange Telegraph correspondent, Mr. Thorpe, on board H.M.S. *Ark Royal*, on 9 May, 1941 :

We have just been listening to the fantastic Italian wireless claims of the ships hit and aircraft brought down during yesterday's air attacks on British warships escorting a convoy in the Western Mediterranean. We were steaming merrily along, and were quite unaware that we had been struck by three torpedoes.

The truth is that the Italian bombers, escorted by hordes of fighters, assisted by German Stuka dive-bombers and Me.110's, with even the weather in their favour, failed to secure even a near miss on any ship. They were given such a rough handling by our fighters and by the tremendous concentration of nearly 100 anti-aircraft guns that they lost seven aircraft for certain ; five more were badly damaged, and probably many others.

Four actual attacks materialized in a day of perpetual threat, two by torpedo bombers, and two by high-level bombers. We were steaming between Cagliari, the Italian air base in South Sardinia and Sicily, and the Italians were able to accompany their bombers with many squadrons of fast and well-armed land fighters, and could bring out Ju.87's and Me.110's from Sicily. The men of the Fleet

Air Arm had their most arduous day, but they came through the gruelling ordeal with flying colours. Fighters whirled and dived among the clouds in a furious duel and relentless attack on enemy bomber formations.

The most notable feat of the day came towards dusk. The last attack on the ships was made by torpedo-bombers, while at the same time a big force of thirty Stukas, protected by six Me.110's, was cruising in the clouds with the obvious intention of making a simultaneous assault. Suddenly six of our fighters dived among them with their machine-guns spitting venomously. One Ju.87 dived into the sea in flames, and two Me.110's staggered off to the shelter of the clouds with white smoke pouring from them.

A terrific fight raged, unseen from the ships below. Bullets rained on the gallant little group of fighters from all sides, but they kept in the air until, hopelessly scattered, the Stukas dropped their bombs in the sea, and fled. It was a victory of the greatest importance, saving the ships from what might have been the most dangerous menace of the day. It was dive-bombers of the same type which successfully attacked H.M.S. *Illustrious* in the Eastern Mediterranean.

One pilot saw twenty-five Italian fighters, and had a running fight with twelve of them, damaging one badly. It was the same story throughout the day—a story of superb and courageous fighting against vastly superior numerical forces of the enemy. It was inevitable that the fighters should suffer casualties. Two of them failed to return, one being shot down into the sea, and another, after shooting down an enemy aeroplane, making a forced landing on the sea. The crew of two in this case were rescued. Other fighters landed scarred with bullet holes, but always there were fighters in the sky to challenge the enemy.

The cost to the enemy was three Savoia 79's, three torpedo-bombers, and one Ju.87 shot down for certain ;

and one Italian fighter, one Ju.87, one Me.110, and two torpedo-bombers damaged, and probably many more. Gunfire accounted for four of the aeroplanes destroyed, three of which were fighters.

Regularly our own guns and those of the other ships fired as enemy aeroplanes were seen diving out of the clouds, but we had a longer breathing spell before the next attack. Fighters roared down, landed, were rushed below in lifts, and after being refuelled and provided with more ammunition, streaked off again, searching eagerly for enemies in the clouds.

Amid constant reports of bomber formations in the neighbourhood came an urgent one that bombers were closing in on the starboard. Presently a mighty chorus of guns thudded, and we then saw four big black bombers in the misty lower edge of the clouds. They were about four thousand feet up. A destroyer on the far starboard vanished behind a wall of water as a stick of bombs crashed around her. Yet they were met with a curtain of flying steel. One machine wobbled and banked sharply into the cover of the clouds. Others followed into the incessant, murderous fire, but passed well ahead of us, and jettisoned their bombs into the sea, then tore away, pursued by a fighter.

The attack on the Western squadron was made in moonlight on the night of May 13th. The Western squadron was covering an important convoy which, in its turn, was escorted by cruisers. The convoy and the cruisers were attacked first, and then the battleships which were screened by a destroyer flotilla. When the main fleet was attacked the battleships opened out with all their guns, and the surrounding destroyers threw up an umbrella barrage against any possible high-level bombing attack.

The enemy aircraft now abandoned their attack on the convoy, and concentrate on the main fleet, coming in from all points of the compass. The return fire from the warships was probably the heaviest barrage ever put up at sea. It lasted for forty-five minutes. Every gun was in action except the great fifteen-inch guns of the battleships, for there were high targets and low targets to be fired at. The only torpedoes which crossed the course of the battleships were avoided by the third ship of the line by the use of helm. The night attack was terminated by a thick fog which suddenly enveloped warships and attacking planes alike. The elements had imposed a truce on the combatants. It was not possible, under these conditions, to find out what damage had been done to the attacking planes. None of the warships engaged, nor the vessels of the convoy, suffered any damage whatsoever, and had not a single man killed or wounded.

## CHAPTER X

### THE BATTLE FOR THE LEVANT

THE CONQUEST OF THE BALKANS BROUGHT the Nazi hordes to the shores of the Ægean Sea. Their seizure of the Greek islands off the Turkish coast and the Italian establishments in the Dodecanese islands enabled German aircraft to fly to Syria where, with the connivance of the Vichy Government of France and its local representatives, they were allowed to refuel and continue their journey of ill-omen to Iraq.

By the middle of May Italian resistance in Abyssinia has practically come to an end. Though the campaign or the conquest of the Italian East African "Empire" is outside the scope of this book, its successful termination had an important bearing on the events I am describing. Air squadrons and seasoned troops were now available for service elsewhere, and were fairly conveniently placed for transfer to the threatened areas of which I have been writing. On the mainland of Asia Minor the British held Basra, its port and aerodrome in Southern Iraq; the aerodrome at Habbaniya; the crossing and bridge over the River Euphrates at Falluja, fifty miles west of Baghdad, and the fort and landing ground at Rutbah on the oil pipe line from Kirkuk to Haifa. From

Falluja our forces threatned Baghdad. A mechanized column of British troops and Arab legionaries had crossed the desert from Transjordan via Rutbah and reinforced the garrison at Habbaniya.

From Palestine British land forces were threatening Syria and a Free French force was preparing to cross the Lebanon frontier. In Syria were large dumps of arms, including tanks and artillery, collected under the Franco-German-Italian armistice terms. Part of this war material was sent by the railway from Aleppo, through Turkish territory, to Mosul. Other material crossed the desert to Iraq, the vehicles returning with much-needed petroleum. The Germans, by the usual infiltration methods, were gradually gaining control and establishing themselves at the numerous aerodromes and landing grounds in the mandated territory of Syria. A certain von Hintzig was in charge of the Nazi campaign of propaganda, bribery, and intimidation. He had been doing similar work for Herr Hitler in Iraq under the direction of Dr. Grobba, the German Minister at Baghdad, before the present war.

After eleven months of intrigue the Vichy Government had so far surrendered its honour and independence to Germany as to be prepared to assist the Nazi plans in every way short of going to war with the British Empire. Admiral Darlan was ready to out-Laval Laval. He permitted the Nazis to send motor torpedo-boats down the River Rhine to the Mediterranean. On 20 May, 1941, the Vichy



Ambassador in Washington, M. Henri Haye, disclosed to the American Secretary of State, Mr. Cordell Hull, that there was a secret clause in the armistice terms permitting the Germans and Italians to use aerodromes and material in all the French colonies and mandated territory. As this meant a free hand for the Nazis in Dakar, the nearest African harbour and airport to the New World, the effect on the American statesman can be imagined.

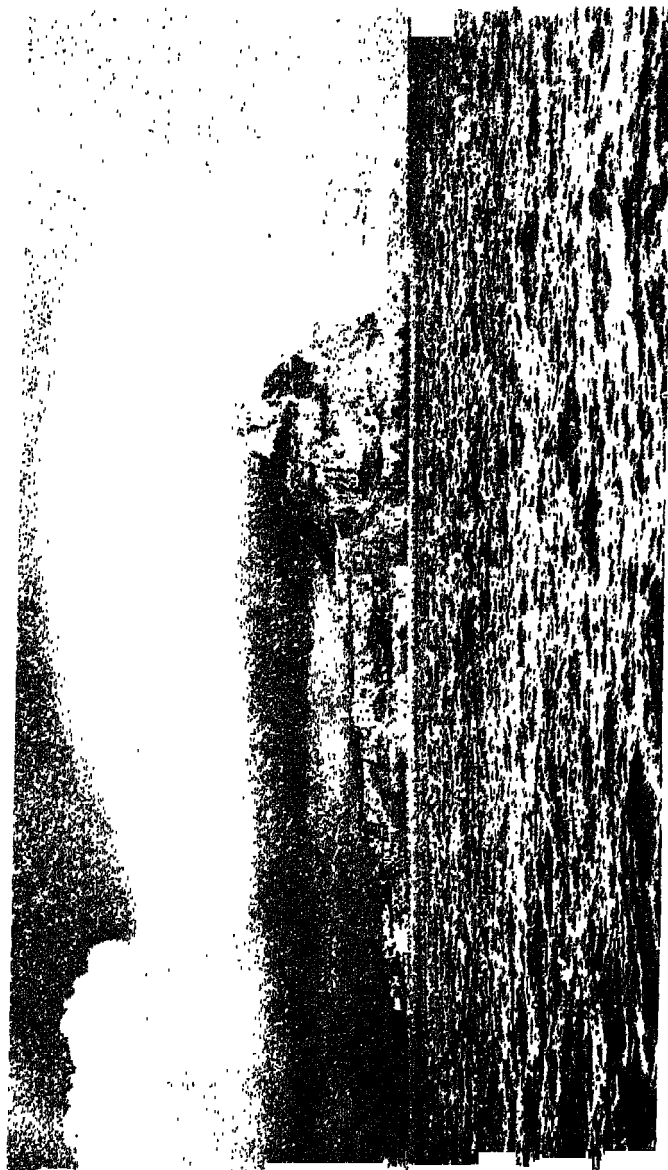
There were indications at the time of a new agreement between the Soviet Government of Russia and the Nazis regarding the Middle East. The reported terms were that Russia would be given a free hand in northern Iran in exchange for a recognition of the Nazi right to seize Iraq and southern Persia (or Iran) if the fortunes of war permitted this new aggression.

General Rommel's "Army of Africa," attempting to invade Egypt from Libya, had met with various difficulties after crossing the Egyptian frontier. Tobruk, strongly held by Imperial forces, held out, and the mobile troops operating from Mersa Matruh were successfully counter-attacking on a small scale. Air assaults on the Nazi concentrations were particularly effective. For more rapid progress, it was necessary for the Germans to obtain control of the Ægean Sea and the Levant basin. In this area the British were firmly established at five main bases—Crete, Cyprus, Haifa, Port Said, and Alexandria. A fleet in being, able to use these bases and an air

force stationed at the aerodromes in their localities could hope to prevent any large-scale sea expeditions by the enemy.

Crete had been garrisoned by British forces in November 1940. To this, the largest island in the Greek archipelago, the King of the Hellenes and his Government, together with about two divisions of Greek troops, had retired when the Germans and Italians overran the Greek mainland. A division of New Zealand and Australian soldiers was sent to strengthen the occupying army, and the whole force was placed under the command of Major-General Bernard Freyberg, V.C., D.S.O. This New Zealand soldier, now aged fifty-two, had won the Distinguished Service Order and two bars in the Gallipoli campaign, and in 1916 on the Western Front won the Victoria Cross as a twenty-seven years old Brigadier.

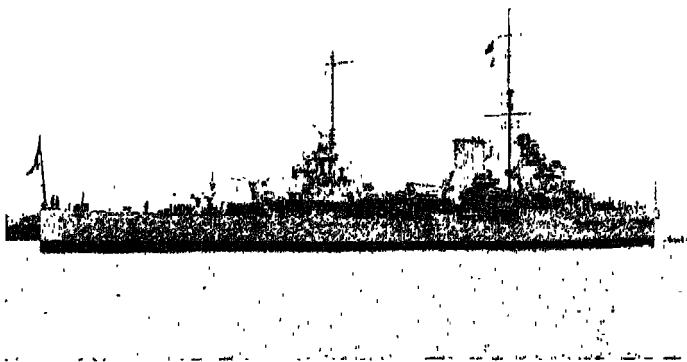
Crete, 160 miles long, and varying in width from forty to eight miles, is mountainous, and possesses one excellent natural harbour, Suda Bay, well known to the Royal Navy ; and a fair-sized aerodrome at Heraklion, near Candia, the capital of the island. There are no railways, but a good road runs from east to west, mostly along the northern shore. In a region of the Old World famous in the social, political, and religious history of mankind, Crete is the site of one of the oldest known civilizations. Here flourished the Minoan culture, the influence of which is traceable over most of the world. This



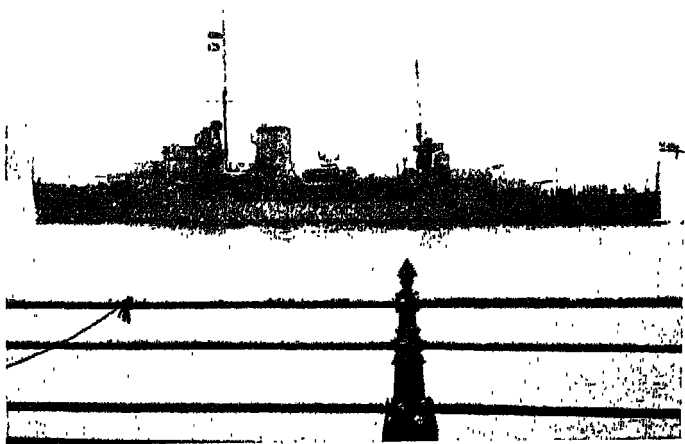
GIBRALTAR: THE CLOUD FORMATION IS KNOWN AS THE "LEVANT"



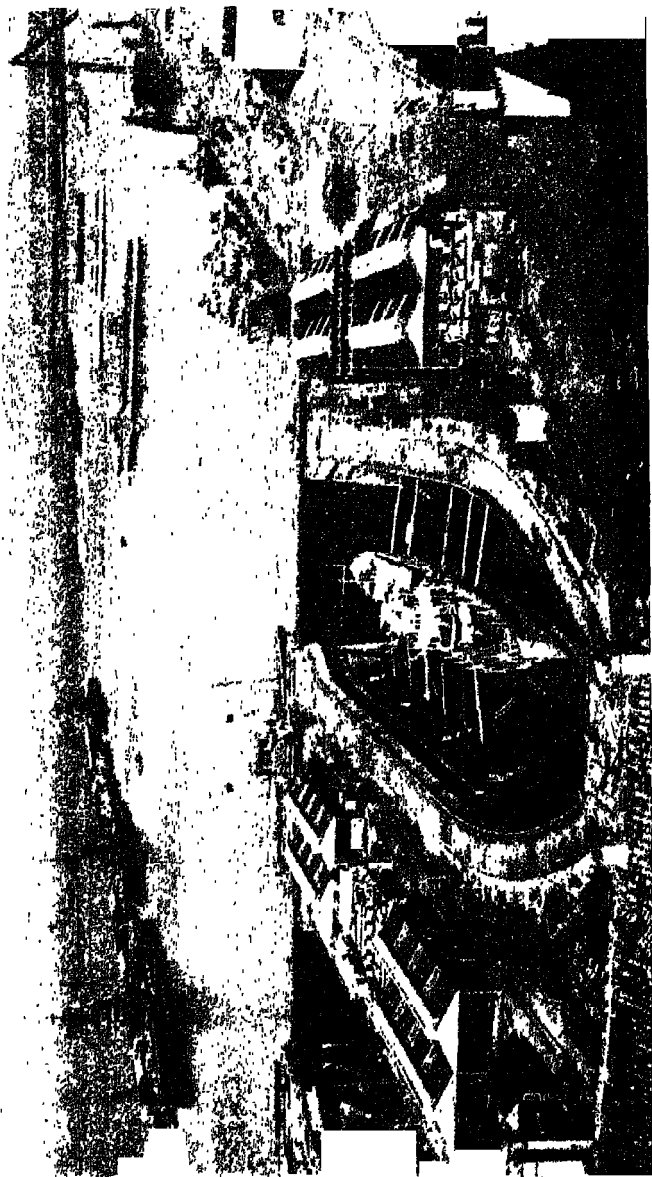
"THE ROCK"



H.M.S. *AJAX*



H.M.S. *ORION*



H.M.S. WORCESTER IN DRY DOCK AT GIBRALTAR. *Left to right:* REVENGE, IRON DUKE, EMPEROR OF INDIA, REPULSE, HOOD; H.M.S. BENBOW ANCHORED IN BAY

ancient Cretan civilization developed a hieroglyphic writing two thousand years before an alphabet had come into use in Ancient Greece. The beautiful island, the former inhabitants of which had played so great a part in human progress, was soon to be assailed by the new barbarians. The western end of the island lies a hundred miles from the southern part of the Peloponnesus, and some sixty miles from the large Cerigo islands, occupied by the Germans. There is a lack of good aerodromes in southern Greece, as we found to our cost during the Balkan campaign, and the nearest airfield of any importance is at Athens, two hundred miles from Heraklion ; but at Rhodes, some hundred miles distant, are several landing grounds. From Heraklion to Cyprus is four hundred and sixty miles, and to Alexandria three hundred and ninety miles. From Derna, the nearest point in Libya to the western point of Crete, is two hundred and ten miles. Cyprus, again, lies only ninety-eight miles from Latakia in Syria, and its chief town, Nicosia, is two hundred and eighty-five miles from Rhodes. The above distances show that the air weapon is, under modern conditions, bound to play a leading rôle in any campaign for the control of the Aegean and the Levant ; and Crete is the most important advance post, both from the naval and aerial points of view, in the whole area. It was said that all roads led to Rome. All air routes certainly lead to Crete. From the naval point of view the island is no less important. The German-

Italian control of the islands off the Turkish coast, and particularly Lemnos, commanding the entrance to the Black Sea, meant that seaborne commerce to Turkey and Russia could be intercepted ; but with Crete in British hands all traffic from Italy to the Ægean or from the Black Sea to the Western Mediterranean could be interrupted.

The lack of aerodrome space in Crete was made good so far as possible by the occupying forces after November 1940. An extemporized airfield at Meleme near Canea and Suda Bay, was to play an important part in subsequent operations.

By May American-made aeroplanes had come into action in the Middle East, including Martin Maryland bombers and Tomahawk fighters.

An Australian force had been sent to Cyprus to reinforce the British troops already there.

In Palestine an opportunity had been missed of raising a Jewish army, at least fifty thousand strong, from the local population. The Zionist leaders in the United States and other countries promised many more thousands of recruits for such an army, and there is no doubt whatever that they would have been forthcoming. In Palestine itself the pioneers of the Zionist settlements are mostly young men, inured to heavy work on the land, acclimatized and knowledgable in the use of tractors and motor transport. Among these pioneers were thousands of German and other Jewish refugees from Nazi cruelty, many of them trained soldiers. All would



fight to the death to save the Holy Land from Nazi desecration. It was feared in Whitehall, the stronghold of apprehension, that the raising of a separate Jewish Legion would annoy the Arabs. Those fickle and venal Arab leaders who were so ready to join in with the Nazis if they thought they were winning, were useless to us, anyhow. Our loyal friends among the Arabs would have welcomed this addition to our fighting strength.

In the event, it was laid down from Whitehall that Jews and Arabs were to be recruited on a fifty-fifty basis, that is to say, the contingents were to be kept numerically equal in race, or, rather, religion. As the Arabs in Palestine, though twice as numerous as the Jews, were slow in offering their services, the numbers of Jews recruited were far fewer than those available ; while the appeal of a separate Jewish Legion was atrophied. We had the worst of both worlds, in any case. Because we enrolled some Jews in the Army of the Nile (and they did fine service in both the North and East African campaigns), Dr. Goebbels's propaganda machine dinned into Moslem ears day in and day out the story that we were arming the Jews against them.

*The Germans were not averse to enrolling Arabs, Lebanese, or even Jews, if they could get them, in Syria. From the beginning of the trouble in Iraq Nazi agents got to work in Syria and arranged to recruit some five thousand men. These were mostly robbers from the hills or riff-raff from the cities, and*

the French authorities and the decent citizens of Syria and the Lebanon were not too sorry to see them sent off to Mosul by train and desert caravan. It almost seems a pity that we wasted good bombs and machine-gun bullets in shooting up some of these sorry cavalcades from the air on the way across.

Far more dangerous was the gradual acquisition of control of the Syrian airports by the Nazis. General Dentz, High Commissioner in Syria, and the representative of the Vichy Government, was at first inclined to refuse to allow this when pressed by von Rosen, the head of the numerous German "missions" in the country; but he was not supported by the Petain Cabinet. As German aircraft, with Iraqi markings, began to stream across to the Euphrates by way of Syria, we had no alternative but to bomb them on the ground wherever we could locate them, and to attack them in flight whenever we could intercept them. On 16 May, 1941, and subsequent days German aircraft were attacked on the Mosul and Rashid aerodromes in Iraq and on the Syrian aerodromes of Palmyra, Damascus, and Rayak. General Dentz retaliated by ordering the British consuls to leave, and by moving troops to the Lebanon-Palestine border. Great concentrations of German and Italian aircraft on the aerodromes in Greece and Rhodes having been observed by our reconnaissance planes and increased air attacks being made by the enemy on Crete, it was obvious that a big offensive was now in preparation. Statements

by German prisoners appeared to confirm this assumption. The Royal Air Force accordingly made heavy raids on the Menidi and Hassani aerodromes in Greece on the nights of May 13th-14th and May 14th-15th, and on Calato aerodrome in Rhodes on the night of May 17th-18th. Heavy raids were also made on the night of May 18th-19th on the Eleusis aerodrome in Greece, and Hassani was again attacked on that night. These night attacks on enemy-controlled airfields were repeated during the Battle of Crete on every possible occasion.

The first main German attack on Crete with airborne troops developed in the early morning of May 20th. Three thousand soldiers were landed from the air on the first day. This air invasion, the first of its kind over the sea, was preceded by a concentrated air bombardment, which lasted all day on May 19th, and most of the following night. It was the heaviest air assault made in the whole eastern campaign. On May 21st attempts to land from small craft on the coasts of the island were made by the Germans. From the beginning, the lack of aerodromes and the effects of the bombings led to a comparative scarcity of British fighter planes. Out-numbered heavily, our pilots made a magnificent resistance until forced to withdraw. During the next two days the Nazis used their troop-carrying planes on a regular ferry service, landing their human cargoes with complete disregard of casualties. Night landings by air were also attempted.

The Nazis had organized a number of special divisions for this form of invasion by air. They number some seven thousand men, and need 230 to 250 planes for their transport in three waves or sections ; each plane making three or more journeys. Trains of gliders, towed by aeroplane, and carrying troops and supplies, are used where there is not much opposition expected from opposing fighter aeroplanes. Troop-carrying aeroplanes, similar to those used by the British Army, and special planes to carry parachutists appeared both in the Polish campaign and the Battle of France earlier in the war. In the airborne attack on the bridge over the Corinth Canal, already described, the Nazis produced a surprise in a quick-opening parachute, operated by a special device, to enable landings to be made from a small height, say, two hundred to four hundred feet. An airborne division has its own light artillery, small tanks, motor-bicycles, commissariat, and medical services, all carried in special aeroplanes. Food, water, and ammunition supplies are dropped in canisters attached to small parachutes. We use this method, and it was utilized to provision our garrison besieged in Calais during the Battle of France. The gliders, in trains of four or five, carry up to twenty soldiers apiece. Their silent approach has military advantages. Gliding seaplanes were used in the attack on Crete. Towed by aeroplanes, they alighted on the sea near the coast; and were

then driven to land by small motor-operated propellers.

It is reported that some twenty of these airborne divisions had been organized and equipped, and most of them marshalled in the Balkans. They may have been prepared originally for an airborne invasion of Britain.

Three years before the present war broke out I was one of a large party invited to the Russian Embassy in London to see a film taken of the large-scale manoeuvres in the province of Kieff in 1935. This was the first great experiment of the Red Army in transporting large bodies of soldiers and equipment by air. A whole division was carried by this means. Many hundreds of parachutists were dropped, and the more distant ones in the film looked like a shower of snowflakes. Then came the troop-carrying aeroplanes, and special planes carrying small tanks, field artillery, and other heavy equipment. A whole division, which I understood was of the Russian strength of about fifteen thousand men, was involved in this air operation.

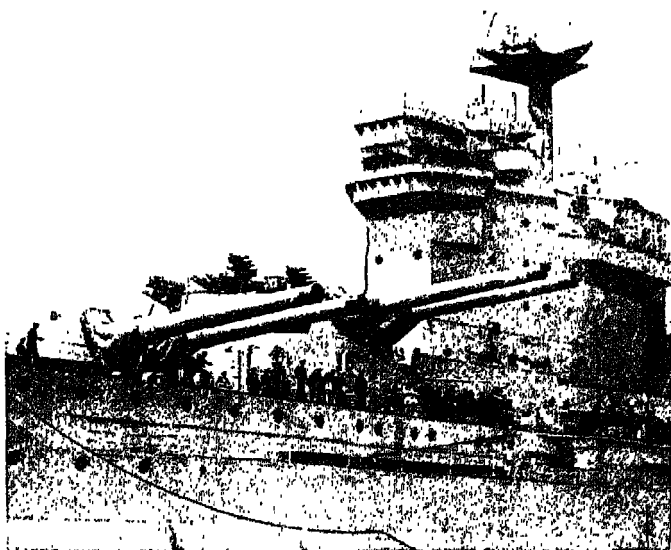
A distinguished company viewed this film, including the military, naval, and air correspondents of various newspapers, and British staff officers from the three Services, those from the Army predominating. I gathered that there was scepticism of the military value of such an operation, particularly among the senior officers, and one distinguished general holding a position of great importance in the

military hierarchy, expressed to me the opinion that the whole thing was a "stunt," and that he was doubtful of its practical value.

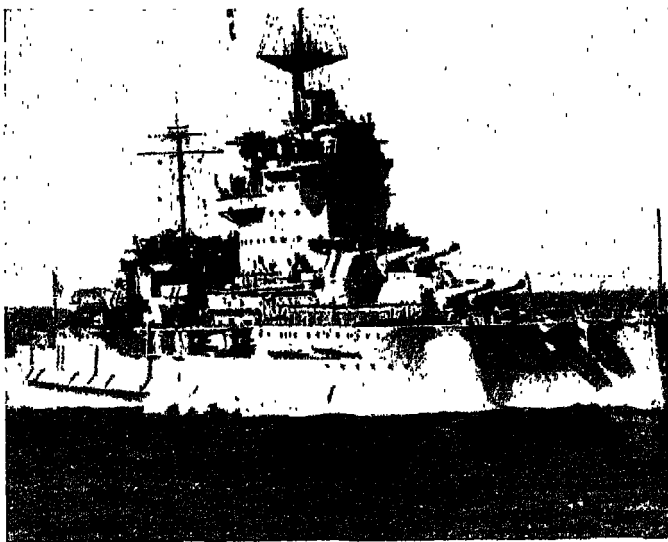
At the time of the Polish campaign in the autumn of 1939, the Germans had prepared armed parachutists and other airborne troops in large numbers. The greatest impression in England, however, seems to have been made by the use of airborne troops in the campaign in the Low Countries, particularly in Holland. I gather it was after this that we began to train our own parachute troops. They were used in southern Italy in the campaign I am describing in one operation, when a large body of them were landed in Calabria, in southern Italy, and did much material damage.

The great virtue of our own Home Guard is in its dispersal, and for that reason it can be a very useful defence against airborne invasion. Wherever parachutists or airborne troops land in the British islands they will find bodies of armed men ready and waiting for them. The sooner every able-bodied Home Guard has his own tommygun the better. A ready-made Home Guard fortunately existed in Crete in the natives of the island, who for generations have possessed their own weapons, and proved themselves fine guerilla fighters in the numerous insurrections against the Turks and their own official government.

Early in the attack on Crete the situation of our air force in the island became precarious. With such small aerodrome space available, it was impossible



15-INCH GUN TURRETS OF H.M.S. *WARSPITE*



H.M.S. *WARSPITE*



AERIAL VIEW OF BASRAH AIRPORT AND PORT OF BASRAH



to maintain a sufficient number of fighters. The British air force had, accordingly, to be withdrawn, and General Freyberg had thereafter to depend on his ground troops only. Once more the need of numerous long-range fighters, so often felt in the Battle of the Atlantic, was demonstrated. Though British long-range fighters came into action from the fourth day of the attack, and onwards, many more were needed to restore the balance in the air. Our orthodox fighters could not operate from the nearest safe aerodromes to Crete owing to the distances. Thus, as already explained, from Crete to Mersa Matruh is 345 miles, and to Alexandria 390 miles. By May 22nd the enemy had obtained a foothold on the Maleme airfield. Two other airfields, at Heraklion and Retimo, had been successfully defended, though useless for our own fighters to operate from.

The first regular convoy of transports sent to Crete by the enemy was intercepted by British naval units led by the cruiser *Ajax*. Two troopships, a number of caiques (small schooners used in the coasting trade), and an Italian destroyer were sunk. About four thousand Germans perished. On the night of May 22nd heavy bombing raids were carried out from Egyptian aerodromes by the Royal Air Force against the Greek aerodromes of Eleusis, Menidi, and Topalia, in the Athens district, and on Mollaoi, in the Peloponnesus, the nearest landing ground to Crete. The result of the first four days'

fighting was that the German landing parties were destroyed, with the exception of a force holding the extemporized aerodrome at Maleme in the west of the island. Here, the enemy were subjected to artillery fire and to bombing by our aircraft operating from Egypt. The contest was of the fiercest character.

The result of the first six days and nights of fighting was as follows: the Nazis had established themselves in the extreme west of the island, where they held the landing ground at Maleme. This aerodrome was under shell-fire by the defenders and was frequently bombed and machine-gunned by long-range and fighting aircraft flown from Egypt. Some enemy light artillery and howitzers had been landed from the air. Approximately 250 enemy aircraft had been destroyed. In the centre and east of the island the air-borne troops landed had been killed, captured or dispersed by the defenders.

On May 24th concentrated bombing attacks were made by the Nazis on Canea, Retimo and Candia, the three largest towns, and on the principal villages. This murderous assault was sheer terrorism and typical of Germany's war methods. Fortunately, most of the civil population had taken to the hills before the bombardments. On this day the King of Greece, the Prime Minister, the British Minister and his Staff, after many adventures in the mountains, succeeded in boarding a British destroyer and were taken to Egypt. Determined attempts had

been made by the Germans to kill or capture His Majesty and the party with him. The first flight of Nazi parachutists landed within a few hundred yards of the house the King had been occupying.

Some British reinforcements, including Royal Marines, and supplies, had been landed. It had been difficult to send more troops, for there are no good harbours on the southern coast of Crete. The ports on the northern coast were under almost continuous air bombardment. Reinforcements were urgently needed. The enemy continued to land more air-borne troops and on the seventh day of the invasion re-formed his attacking parties near Retimo and Candia. His reinforced troops in the Maleme area were able to take the offensive against the allied lines defending Canea and Suda Bay.

The best troops in the world reach the end of their prowess at a certain stage. Continuous air bombing, from both high-flying and diving aircraft, lack of sleep, physical and mental fatigue will wear down the best of soldiers. If, as Mr. Churchill stated in Parliament, it was intended to defend Crete "to the death," the garrison should have been stronger in numbers and with ample tanks and artillery. If this was impossible owing to commitments elsewhere, great efforts should have been made and great risks taken to throw in large reinforcements as soon as the Nazi plans were exposed. If the Germans could try to land soldiers and equipment in small ships *without* command of the Ægean

Sea, what efforts could we not have made *with* command of the Ægean Sea? Here, again, the answer may be shortage of shipping. Certainly the great numerical strength in the air deployed by the Germans in these operations to conquer Crete was a serious obstacle to our movements at sea in the daytime; yet, was it not possible to land relieving forces by night? The answers to these, and some other questions, may not be given till long after the event. What is plain is that the heroism of the defenders of Crete dislocated the Nazi time-table, with important results on the campaign in the Levant, including the operations in Iraq.

The enemy had one extraordinary stroke of luck. Three thousand Italian soldiers taken prisoner by the Greeks in Albania were in a prisoners' camp in Crete. German paratroops landed near the camp, overpowered the guards and released the Italians. They also freed the inmates of the island's jail. These Greek convicts took the first opportunity of rejoining their compatriots and fighting in the battle against the invaders.

Apart from a few German soldiers landed in Greek coasting schooners or other small craft, which slipped through our naval patrols, no large scale attempts by the enemy to send invading forces to Crete by sea were successful. In these operations to ward off an enemy landing, which succeeded in preventing the Germans disembarking tanks and artillery, we suffered from heavy air attacks. In the

first week two cruisers and four destroyers were sunk and some damage, fortunately not very serious, was inflicted on two of our battleships and on other war vessels. The vessels sunk were :

H.M.S. *Gloucester*, light cruiser (Captain H. A. Rowley, R.N.).

H.M.S. *Fiji*, light cruiser (Captain P. B. R. W. William-Poulett, R.N.).

H.M.S. *Juno*, destroyer (Commander St. J. R. J. Tyrwhitt, R.N.).

H.M.S. *Greyhound*, destroyer (Commander W. R. Marshall A'Deane, D.S.C., R.N.).

H.M.S. *Kelly*, destroyer (Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten, G.C.V.O., D.S.O., R.N.).

H.M.S. *Kashmir*, destroyer (Commander K. A. King, R.N.).

The *Kelly* and *Kashmir* were sunk by air attacks after bombarding the Maleme airfield from the sea. Thanks to the gallantry of their consorts, under heavy and continual air attack, many survivors were rescued, including 34 officers and 500 men from the *Fiji*, 8 officers and 120 men from the *Kelly*, 9 officers and 150 men from the *Kashmir*, 6 officers and 98 men from the *Juno*, and 3 officers and 88 men from the *Greyhound*. Apart from the Italian destroyer sunk, as already described, and one other Italian destroyer which was sighted, fired on and driven off, only motor-torpedo-boats were used by the enemy in these naval operations. On the night of May 20th

eight of these motor-torpedo-boats attacked our patrols, but were driven off, two of them being sunk and two others damaged. The German air forces had the advantage of operating from their own bases in great strength while our warships could not be supported by land-based aircraft. The air attacks were continued during all the hours of daylight by relays of bombers making both high-level and diving attacks and sometimes both simultaneously. One cruiser, in two hours, was straddled by 186 bombs, but escaped serious injury. The British warships were forced to use up most of their outfit of anti-aircraft ammunition during these long-sustained actions and this necessitated a withdrawal to Alexandria to replenish their magazines. These air attacks on our warships, the heaviest in the whole war, show once more the necessity for a large force of heavily armed long-range fighter aeroplanes capable of accompanying a fleet to sea.

It will be convenient here to refer to the fortunes of the Greek Navy. This small but efficient fleet assisted the Royal Navy in the withdrawal from Greece and suffered heavily in the operations. A destroyer was hit by dive-bombers on the night of April 12th and had to be docked at Salamis for repairs. These were not completed when the Germans overran the Greek mainland and she had to be scuttled. A destroyer went down on April 15th, with all her guns firing, as the result of a concentrated attack by dive-bombers. Another

destroyer, patrolling the Saronic Gulf on the afternoon of April 23rd, was attacked by a strong formation of bombers which dropped fifty bombs on and around her. One of these hit the bridge killing the captain, two other officers and twenty seamen, and wounding fifty men. The ship went down rapidly. The dying captain, mortally wounded, refused to be rescued. So did many of the wounded seamen, shouting to the crews of the ships' boats coming to their help, "Let us die. Long live Greece." Eleven out of the thirteen torpedo-boats on the Greek Navy List were sunk by German bombers. A cruiser, seven destroyers, two torpedo-boats and five submarines survived these operations and remained in service with the British Mediterranean Fleet.

To return to the land fighting in Crete. It is estimated that the Germans had to throw into the attack seven of their airborne divisions, representing 49,000 specially trained personnel. At one time, 100 Junkers troop-carriers were counted on the Maleme landing-ground. Such a number could transport 2,000 equipped soldiers in one journey without the aid of gliders. The method of landing field-guns was by means of three parachutes, one attached to the breach and one to each of the two trunnions. The Germans in these operations disproved the theory that airborne troops must have flat ground on which to land. Oblivious to casualties, they landed parachutists on the hillsides, on moun-

tain tops and in woods. In the woods the soldiers cut themselves loose in the trees from their parachutes and climbed down. After some of these large-scale landings from the air the countryside was dotted over a wide area with the variously coloured parachutes from which the soldiers had disengaged themselves so that in the distance it looked like a great field of flowers.

I must now turn to the other fronts in this widespread battle of the Levant. By May 27th there were signs of a collapse of the Rashid Ali movement in Iraq. The Germans had not been able to send sufficient support early enough and the tribes who had been sitting on the fence waiting to see which was the stronger side still hesitated to throw in their lot with the pro-Axis Government. On the Libyan front the German offensive was renewed during the last week in May. Advancing in four strong armoured columns, the Nazis retook the "Hellfire" (Halfaya) Pass, which had been in British hands for a fortnight, and began their long and arduous expedition across the Western Desert.

The heavy responsibilities of the Mediterranean squadron in the operations at Crete did not prevent an effective blockade of the Libyan coast against enemy reinforcements. In the last week of May six transports making for Tripoli and other North African ports were torpedoed by our submarines. These included a large liner of about 18,000 tons which was hit with two torpedoes en route for Libya.



She carried approximately 3,000 enemy troops. Among the other ships torpedoed were two large heavily laden oil tankers, one of 5,000 tons flying the French colours, and another of 4,000 tons. On May 22nd an Italian destroyer convoying transports was sunk. The Air Force contributed by frequent and heavy air attacks on the port of Benghazi and on enemy shipping off the North African coast.

The development of this wide-flung battle for the Levant and its subsequent stages must be described in a further volume dealing with the Mediterranean campaign.

The writer of contemporary history suffers from the inevitable disadvantage of being unable to give the whole of the facts. No historian in any country during a war, whether he is a citizen of a neutral or a belligerent State, can possibly obtain full information about all that is going on. A complete factual picture is only available many years after the major events, when the official histories are published, the archives open, and the principal participants buried.

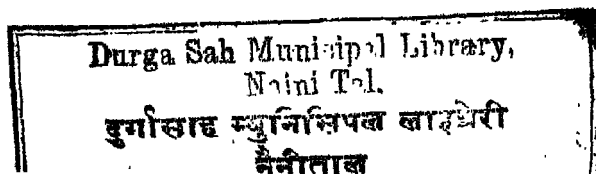
Again, the contemporary historian in writing for publication is estopped from using the whole of the information in his possession. Much of it cannot be disclosed during a war, in order that information shall not reach the enemy of his country. All that he writes is subject to censorship, in any case.

On the other hand, the contemporary historian usually has access to information, much of which

has been lost or overlaid when the research student collates his facts years after the events. Furthermore, the contemporary writer can describe the moods and feelings of the masses of the people, and can reproduce the mental atmosphere of the times and popular reactions to the unfolding drama.

In drawing up this account of a great campaign in a vitally important war area, I have had the advantage of being able to check all the principal facts from official sources and from the narratives and bulletins issued by the British Departments of State concerned. In this connection I would like to thank the officials of the Ministry of Information for their ready assistance at all times.

Perhaps I may be allowed, as a sailor, to pay a special tribute to the work of the Royal Navy (and I include the Royal Mercantile Marine) not only in the vast operations in the Mediterranean theatre but also in the services rendered to our cause by the officers and seamen in all the Seven Seas. Important as has been the campaign in the Middle Sea, the personnel of the Navy and their comrades in the Merchant Service have had other grave responsibilities, including the defence of the British Isles against invasion and the keeping open of vital sea routes over the whole world. In assessing the part played by the Eastern and Western squadrons of the Mediterranean Fleet, these other responsibilities must be taken into account.



## APPENDIX

*The following is a list of the monthly figures of Mercantile Losses due to Enemy Action, revised to date on a calendar monthly basis from the beginning of the war up to the end of April 1941.*

PERIOD	BRITISH		ALLIED		NEUTRAL		TOTAL
	No	Gross Tons	No.	Gross Tons	No.	Gross Tons	No. Gross Tons
1939							
Sept.	35	155,160	1	2,660	13	29,645	49 187,465
Oct.	23	105,525	6	45,273	15	43,641	44 194,439
Nov.	28	58,711	5	21,942	14	83,973	47 164,626
Dec.	32	104,909	1	7,030	38	83,145	71 195,084
1940							
Jan.	28	95,544	2	6,588	36	97,569	66 199,701
Feb.	23	117,467	2	9,145	29	92,463	54 219,075
Mar.	14	39,467	2	3,172	21	54,965	37 97,604
Apr.	21	75,258	6	17,022	15	43,092	42 135,372
May	31	75,151	21	126,904	12	46,595	64 248,650
June	65	269,783	35	166,758	28	97,361	128 533,902
July	69	290,270	16	52,911	20	62,672	105 405,853
Aug.	58	282,432	12	50,758	18	54,281	88 387,471
Sept.	60	307,427	18	81,389	14	46,737	92 435,553
Oct.	66	299,399	17	71,964	13	52,253	96 423,616
Nov.	65	299,816	16	53,922	4	15,068	85 368,806
Dec.	55	230,307	12	69,668	5	13,222	72 313,197
1941							
Jan.	41	205,473	16	97,567	1	2,962	58 306,002
Feb.	68	264,523	15	63,103	2	6,378	85 334,004
Mar.	81	326,631	32	141,043	6	21,555	119 489,229
April	60	293,089	43	189,473	3	5,562	106 488,124

It should be observed :

1. A substantial part of the Neutral Tonnage included in this statement refers to ships sunk by enemy action which had never been chartered by us, and which were not trading with this country.

2. It also includes a figure of approximately 50,000 tons of Italian and Japanese shipping sunk by the Germans prior to Italy entering the war.



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